

ALONE
OF
ALL HER SEX

*The Myth and the Cult
of the Virgin Mary*

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Chapter Seven

MARIA REGINA

*Lady, flower of alle thing,
Rosa sine spina,
Thou bore Jesu, heavenes king,
Gratia divina.
Of alle thou bear'st the prize,
Lady, queen of Paradise
Electa.¹*

—ANONYMOUS (c. 1250)

AT THE ASSUMPTION, Mary becomes Queen of Heaven, and the crown she wears on her head is the token of her triumph. Her crown seems the simplest symbol to express her supremacy, an accessory so natural and so commonplace that it is almost invisible. Yet its appearance subtly underlines many arguments and tenets of the Catholic Church, not only about the glory of Mary the individual, but also about the power of the Church itself, for which the Virgin often stands. Contemporary Mariology focusses on the ancient patristic theme of Mary's identity with the Church, and as the Bride of Christ and the Queen of Heaven she reveals the Church's most profound ambitions for itself, both in the afterlife, when it hopes to be reunited like the New Jerusalem with Christ the Bridegroom, and on earth, where it hopes to hold sway in plenitude of spiritual power.² It is noteworthy that the image of the *Regina Caeli* holds up a mirror to the fluctuations of the Church's self-image: in times of stasis and entrenchment, as under the popes Pius XII and to some extent Paul VI, veneration of the Virgin is encouraged, and in times of strong ecumenicalism and change, when the Church is less

self-righteous and assured, devotion to the Virgin, especially under her triumphant aspect, is restrained and declines.

This oscillation has ancient precedents, for the first image of *Maria Regina* on a wall of the church of S. Maria Antiqua,³ the oldest Christian building in the Roman Forum, was painted in the first half of the sixth century. Seated in majesty on a throne, the Virgin Queen contains a multi-layered message: she belongs to a classical tradition of personifying cities and institutions as goddesses, and as such, in the heart of Rome, she embodies the new Rome which is the Church just as the *Dea Roma* now on the Capitol represented the pagan city. And because she is arrayed in all the pearl-laden, jewel-encrusted regalia of a contemporary secular monarch, she also proclaims, in a brilliantly condensed piece of visual propaganda, the concept that the Church is a theocracy of which the agent and representative is the pope, the ruler of Rome.

So although a crown now seems such a normal part of Mary's appearance that it hardly seems worthy of comment, the symbol—like all symbols—is not quite so innocent. For by projecting the hierarchy of the world onto heaven, that hierarchy—be it ecclesiastical or lay—appears to be ratified by divinely reflected approval; and the lessons of the Gospel about the poor inheriting the earth are wholly ignored. Also, from the point of view of the Virgin's relationship to the role of women in the west, it is crucial that she was cast in an exceptional role—that of a queen. The honour paid Mary as queen redounded to the honour of queens, to the exclusion of other women; and the fact that the Virgin was female was mitigated by her regal precedence over all other women. Of course, it is only natural for men to attempt to convey the idea of excellence according to the lights of their society. Nevertheless, the cult of Mary as queen served for centuries to uphold the status quo to the advantage of the highest echelons of power.

The Fathers had identified Mary with the Church, foreshadowed by such scriptural figures as the New Jerusalem and the "great wonder" of the Apocalypse. Early Christian art, by borrowing one image in particular from the vocabulary of official imperial art, had increased support for the idea that the Church was an authority mightier than all earthly kings. For the adoration of the magi was modelled by Christian artists on the offering of tribute by the vanquished at a Roman triumph, in order to underline the supreme power of the king whom the wise men worship⁴ (colour plate III, figure 4). On Christian sarcophagi and artefacts from the second century onwards the three wise men wear outlandish dress, peaked caps, short cloaks, and leggings. Such garb signals clearly that these men are foreigners, paying the customary tribute, the *aurum coronarium* of barbar-

ians acknowledging the mastery of the Roman empire. On the obelisk of Theodosius I in Constantinople, contemporary with many sarcophagus carvings of the three wise men, the scene still depicts prisoners-of-war paying homage to their conquerors.⁵

The eastern barbarians laying the symbols of sovereignty at the feet of the infant Christ and his mother helped to define Mary's majesty because, as we have seen, the magi were understood to be kings. Although in the visual arts they only exchanged their foreign caps for crowns in the tenth century, the Fathers, from Origen onwards, had interpreted their submission as an epiphany of the greater majesty of the "son of the Highest," which eclipsed all temporal power.

This counterpoint of victory and subjection governs the growth of the cult of Mary as queen. Although on the walls and sarcophagi of the third and fourth centuries she remains an inconsequential figure, in the mid-fifth-century mosaics on the glittering triumphal arch of S. Maria Maggiore, built by Pope Sixtus III (432-40) at the time of the Council of Ephesus, her dim figure acquires sudden, splendid definition as an Augusta arrayed in all the paraphernalia of imperial rank. Band upon band, the scenes from the Bible rise up the huge wall, as in the victory columns of the emperors, until they culminate with the throne of God. Throughout, the triumph of Christ is proclaimed in the imagery of Roman art, and Mary, her black hair dressed under a narrow diadem, robed in pearl-sewn cloth of gold, with a huge collar of gems, takes her seat on her son's right hand as he receives the three magi in imperial audience.

Scholars argue whether the mosaic sequence was influenced by the proclamation of the *Theotokos* at the Council of Ephesus. If it had been, it would seem likely that Mary would occupy an even more prominent place in the scheme, and receive the magi herself, as she does for instance in the later basilica S. Apollinare Nuovo of the Ostrogothic King Theodoric (474-526) at Ravenna. There, the Virgin, not the Christ child, extends a welcoming hand to the barbarians, who, in gorgeous costume, present her with gifts.

The regal role of Mary as the mother of the God-Emperor became a central and forceful symbol of power, which could be and was used to reinforce the authority of the Church on earth.⁶ From the sixth century onwards, when the popes in Rome were struggling to assert their wishes and their outlook against the influence of the Byzantine emperor in Constantinople and his representative in Italy, and against the Lombard kings in northern Italy, the image of the triumphant Virgin, as a figure of the triumphant Church, was an important medium of propaganda for their

argument. Politics and piety interacted, and the nexus of circumstances that fostered the cult of Mary in the west can be deciphered vividly from the archaeological palimpsests of early Christian Rome. The more the papacy gained control of the city, the more veneration of the mother of the emperor in heaven, by whose right the Church ruled, increased.

For instance, the church of S. Maria Antiqua had connections with imperial authority, for it had been fashioned out of the lofty vestibule of the Emperor Domitian's palace and then, after its consecration in the fifth or sixth century, it had served as the private chapel of the Greek emperors and their representative in Rome. But it became the first church in Rome where the Church usurped the functions of the civil authorities, where an ecclesiastical diaconate took over such civil duties as the care of the sick and the old, hospitality to wayfarers, and the distribution of bread to the poor.

After the barbarian invasions, particularly under Pope Gregory the Great (590-604), the papacy assumed administrative powers in the city, and this responsibility, coupled with the Church's natural claim to spiritual authority, created varying tensions with the nominal ruler of Rome, the emperor in Constantinople. Pope Martin I (642-9), for instance, used the walls of S. Maria Antiqua to denounce the emperors' Monothelite heresy, in bold visual statements of orthodoxy over the triumphal arch. (The Monothelites held that Jesus' divine and human wills were one.) Martin I was captured by the Byzantines, imprisoned, and brutally maltreated until he died in exile in 655. Pope Sergius I (687-701) defied the Lombard king in the north and central Italy, and the Byzantine exarchs in Ravenna; he was also the pope who, following the time-proven custom of the Roman authorities, put on a grand display for the populace to stir their faith and their allegiance. He instituted candlelit all-night processions through the city on the feastdays of the Annunciation, the Purification, the Nativity of the Virgin, and the Dormition. On the vigil of August 15 he himself led the crowds barefoot from the Lateran to vespers in S. Maria Maggiore and back again, through the Forum to S. Maria Antiqua before mass in the morning. (These night-long revels were only abolished, for various abuses, by the austere Pope Pius V in 1566.)

Sergius' successor, John VII (705-7), united in himself qualities and circumstances that made his brief reign exceptional in the developments of the cult of the Virgin in the west. John was a Greek whose father, Plato (d. 686), was the curator and restorer of the Byzantine emperor's palace in Rome, which included the chapel, S. Maria Antiqua. John was *eruditissimus*, educated in Constantinople, and had imbibed such a lively

love of the Virgin that the *Liber Pontificalis* actually finds it worthy of comment. An inscription found on a marble ambo John gave S. Maria Antiqua describes him in Latin and Greek as John, "servant of the mother of God," in imitation of the emperor in Byzantium, who styled himself "servant of God."

Just as the Virgin was the protective deity of the Byzantine ruling house in their chapel of Blachernae in Constantinople, so John emphasized her patronage in the palace chapel of the emperors in Rome, where once the pagan rulers had implored the goddess Minerva to watch over their safety. The greetings of the angel Gabriel and of Elisabeth to the Virgin—later to become the beloved prayer the Hail Mary—were inscribed on the walls of S. Maria Antiqua at this time; and frescoes, votive images, and a magnificent pulpit were commissioned to adorn it. For Old St. Peter's, John VII ordered mosaics that depicted the mysteries of her life and Christ's, and the fragments that survive, in the crypt of St. Peter's and in S. Maria in Cosmedin, show the depths of his attachment to the Virgin. Above all, John VII was the first pope to have himself painted during his lifetime in the Greek ceremonial attitude of prostration, the *proskynesis*, at the feet of the Virgin in majesty, for a painting in the basilica of S. Maria in Trastevere.⁷

This magnificent icon, over six feet high, sumptuously framed and inscribed with votive words of praise, amplifies the image of *Maria Regina* as it appears in the sixth-century fresco of S. Maria Antiqua (figure 12). To all the pearly and glittering insignia that adorned the latter is added the cross-surmounted staff—another symbol of imperial power. Angels stand at her side, carrying spears like the *protospathari*, the imperial guard. Mary is seated on an imperial purple cushion, stiff with jewels, with her feet resting above the ground, on a *subpedaneum*; a great arcaded diadem crowns her head and a huge nimbus irradiates about her. But the most important aspect of the icon is the presence of the reigning pope at the Virgin's feet. For this mingling of the living and the dead plucks the Virgin out of an inaccessible heaven and brings her within reach of the one appointed emissary on earth who, like an emperor's minister in Constantinople, can grasp his master's foot and be assured his wishes will be granted. In consequence, the legitimacy of the pope as the channel and interpreter of the divine will on earth is affirmed.

Sergius I and John VII, though both Greeks, withstood the ambitions of the emperor in Constantinople over the Church, by refusing to sign the reform decrees of Justinian II's synod of 691, and thus attempting to assert Rome's sole right to legislate on Church affairs. In Rome itself,

rivalry with the other claimants to temporal power in Italy continued to fashion the imagery with which the papal entourage revered the Virgin. In a side chapel of S. Maria Antiqua, Pope Zachary I (741-52) flanks the Madonna in majesty holding a cross staff, but his portrait probably substituted an earlier one of John VII. In the same chapel, the papal minister Theodatus, a layman and the *primicerius* (first minister) of the papal court, commissioned frescoes which though badly mutilated still represent him, his wife, his small son and daughter, all wearing the square haloes of the living, in courtly attitudes of reverence before the Virgin and child. In another fresco, Theodatus kneels, holding up lighted tapers as was the custom in the imperial court. As the pope's chief administrator, Theodatus felt that he and his family were in touch with the highest mysteries. The paintings, faded and fragmentary, vividly communicate the confidence of the Church's men over a thousand years ago.

The chief catalyst to the cult of the Virgin in the west at this time was the Iconoclast heresy. Under the gifted and forceful Emperor Leo III, the Isaurian (reigned 717-40), the first blows against the use of images and relics in Christian worship were struck by the Byzantine imperial court. Around the year 727, a crowd composed mainly of women rioted when a revered icon of Christ over the bronze gate of the Sacred Palace at Constantinople was removed at the emperor's command.⁸ Leo III's son, Constantine V, an equally imposing but even fiercer leader (reigned 740-75), called a council in 753 or 754 that officially denounced all icons in Christian cult and declared all who continued to use them outlaws. The heretics thereafter were fanatical, and for nearly a hundred years imposed their views, claiming savagely the lives of many Christians who refused to break with the iconodule traditions of their church. There was a respite from persecution from 780 to 815 under the Empress Irene, but after her the Emperor Leo V the Armenian (reigned 813-20) reinstated the ferocious puritanism of his predecessors, which lasted until the Triumph of Orthodoxy in 843 under the Empress Theodora (reigned 842-56) and the Emperor Michael III (reigned 842-67).

During the Iconoclast trauma, numerous fugitives, ecclesiastical and lay, made for the west, where Greek culture was not entirely alien and they could practice their cherished customs. Sicily and Rome in particular received an influx of iconodule Byzantines and were infused with the fervent, excitable strain of piety that had until Iconoclasm been the unrestrained character of Greek worship of the Virgin and the saints. At a more political level, the Iconoclast emperors' usurpation of the pope's authority in spiritual matters and their continued heretical defiance also

galvanized the west. Iconoclasm marks the tragic beginning of the schism between the Greek and Latin worlds. It was at this time also that the papacy emerged as a western power: Pope Stephen III (752-7) crossed the Alps to ask the aid of Pepin, the Frankish king, against the ambitions of the Lombards in central Italy. Pepin complied, defeated the Lombards twice, and in 756 the pope was given the papal state.

The image of the Virgin in triumph therefore served a twofold purpose: it asserted the orthodoxy of images themselves, and its content indicated the powers of the pope as the ruler of Christian hearts and minds at a secular as well as spiritual level. During the Iconoclast heresy in Byzantium, a current of energy electrified Rome, the city of the papal rulers. Churches were built, and adorned with golden mosaics, with bright frescoes and magnificent icons. And all over the city, the new blend of defiance and pride inspired the takeover of pagan buildings, hitherto shunned, and their conversion to Christian worship. And through all these undertakings pounds an excited dithyramb in praise of the Virgin, instrument of the Incarnation, and personification of the Church.

The popes of the period showed her their love: Gregory III (731-41) built a monument at the tomb of St. Peter's that depicted the Virgin on one side, Christ on the other, and he placed an icon of the Virgin near the relic of the crib in S. Maria Maggiore; Stephen III had a golden effigy of the Virgin cast for the same basilica; Paul I (757-67) dedicated two chapels in Old St. Peter's to her, and decorated them with mosaics. Paschal I (817-24), who welcomed refugees from the second wave of persecutions under the Emperor Leo IV, commissioned some of the most memorable mosaic apses in Rome—S. Prassede, S. Cecilia in Trastevere—but above all S. Maria in Domnica, where, flanked by throngs of angels whose azure haloes recede like the waves of the ocean, Pope Paschal, wearing, like Theodatus before him, the square halo of the living, humbly clasps the red slippered foot of the Virgin in triumph.⁹

All the circumstances present in the upsurge of Marian worship in Rome converge in the wondrously beautiful and holy church of S. Maria in Cosmedin,¹⁰ which stands in the former cattle market of ancient Rome, the Forum Boarium, across a curving space from two toy-like pagan temples, once dedicated to Vesta and to Portunus, god of harbours. This chaste but opulently marbled church has now been restored again to the Greek monks who were first given it to embellish and tend in the eighth century after they had fled to safety in the west. Nostalgically, the Greek fugitives called their church after a quarter of Constantinople famous for its beauty, the *Kosmidion*, "from the Greek word for

decoration, and for the world, which is God's most beautiful work of art."¹¹ In winter, when the church is cold, the melodious Greek Orthodox services are held in a side chamber, built above a sixth-century B.C. temple to Ceres, which was only deconsecrated at the end of the fourth century, when the Emperor Theodosius finally ordered the closure of all pagan temples. It was then converted into a food distribution centre for the city, which, along the lines of S. Maria Antiqua, was taken over either in the later sixth or the seventh century by the ecclesiastical authorities and administered as a diaconate for the care of the old, the poor, the sick, and pilgrims. The massive *opus quadratum* blocks of stone of this ancient building are still embedded in the side wall of the chamber where mass is sung in winter, and still visible in the crypt below the church, now a special votive shrine of the Virgin.

In the gallery above the nave, looking towards the main altar, imposing fluted columns with Corinthian capitals and stucco reliefs of grain baskets form the visible skeleton of the church. They are the pillars of a *statio annonae*, a market inspector's imperial office and granary, which stood adjacent to the temple of Ceres, the corn goddess. Like new vegetation clothing an ancient rock face, the Christian church grew up between the granary and the temple, at once cancelling the former pagan places and yet avoiding the false magic of their exact position. Later, under Pope Adrian I (772-95), nephew of the Theodatus of S. Maria Antiqua, the church was enlarged until it absorbed the ancient substructure into the Christian fabric. But the functions of the sacred spot survived: there the church distributed bread, and sang the praises of a goddess whose cult has continued uninterrupted in S. Maria in Cosmedin until today.

It was in the twelfth century, however, that the church was richly embellished with the many-hued *opus sectile* marbled pavements and walls that make it such a work of art. Pope Calixtus II (1119-24), who identified strongly with his predecessor Calixtus I (217-22), the reputed founder of the great basilica of S. Maria in Trastevere, commissioned the decorations. And it was, significantly, Calixtus II who scored the chief papal triumph of the middle ages when he signed the Concordat of Worms in 1122 with the Emperor Henry V, settling the long bitter dispute about investitures and reserving for the Holy See the prerogative of appointing bishops. He commemorated this signal victory of Church over state in the monumental chapel of St. Nicholas in St. John Lateran, where he installed a fresco of Mary enthroned above two popes, and he transformed S. Maria in Cosmedin into a monument to the rights of the papacy by using the imagery of *Maria Regina*, the living embodiment of

the Church triumphant,] by inscribing her praises on the walls and by raising a splendid marbled bishop's cathedra in the central apse.

Secular imagery was used to depict the Virgin Mary in Rome by the popes in order to advance the hegemony of the Holy See; and her cult was encouraged because she was in a profound manner identified with the figure of the Church itself. But this triumphalism fostered by the Church was turned on its head in the later middle ages, when temporal kings and queens took back the borrowed symbolism of earthly power to enhance their own prestige and give themselves a sacred character. The use of the emblems of earthly power for the Mother of God did not empty them of their temporal content: rather, when kings and queens wore the sceptre and the crown they acquired an aura of divinity.

To Byzantine eyes after the traumatic era of Iconoclasm, such mingling of the material and spiritual realms constituted an appalling solecism. The Lady of Heaven and her son could not ape the fashion of mortals, however special the relationship between them. Thus the Santa Sophia mosaic that celebrates the Triumph of Orthodoxy in 843 shows the Virgin Mary, simply clothed and in the long dark blue veil, the *maphorion*, with the Christ child on her knees. The archangels Michael and Gabriel, in huge sweeping rainbow-coloured wings, stand on either side of them, and the inscription proclaims: "The images which the impostors had cast down, the pious emperors have again set up."¹²

The restraint and caution of the iconography was to remain the unchanging hallmark of Byzantine art. The coins of the post-iconoclast empire also highlight the contrast between the austere Virgin and the luxury-loving rulers. On the coins of the sister empresses Zoe (d. 1050) and Theodora (d. 1057), the Virgin confers power on heaven's delegates on earth, sometimes by holding a crown over their heads, sometimes by grasping their cross-staff. But their dress proclaims their difference.¹³ The flexible approach of the west, which allowed the Virgin to wear the egg-sized pearls of temporal queens, was to remain foreign and repugnant to Byzantine eyes.

But because western imagery obscured the demarcation lines between the spiritual and material spheres, and fortified the special relation between the court of heaven and the court on earth, the kings of Christendom laid claim to higher, spiritual authority by extending the sacred meaning of royal attributes and rituals. Thus although the splendid coronation of Charlemagne in St. Peter's Rome in 800 implied that the pope had the sovereign power of creating kings, it also elevated the king to a holy state: he was consecrated in the sight of God. Otto III, the

German emperor, was crowned no less than three times: king of the Germans in 983; king of the Lombards in 995; and holy Roman emperor in Rome in 996, when he was sixteen years old. Around the year 1000, he was painted in a *Gospel Book*, crowned by the hand of God emerging from a large nimbus above, surrounded by the symbols of the evangelists and seated on a raised throne supported by a naked personification of earth—in short, as Christ in his aspect of the ruler of the world.

Although the emperor in Constantinople (whose elegant culture the Ottonians were so anxious to emulate) saw himself as the vicar of Christ on earth, he would never have impersonated his redeemer, as Otto III does in this illumination. As John Beckwith has written: "The Byzantine court would have thought such a representation outré and bizarre. Such telescoping of the natural with the supernatural order was to them deplorable."¹⁴ But as the lines of communication from Byzantium become stretched, these distinctions become blurred, and aggressive claims to total authority on the part of Christian kings continue to find expression in brave propaganda images. One of the most striking is a golden mosaic in the beautiful Martorana church in Palermo, where Roger II, king of Sicily, another king who longed to match the splendour and sophistication of the Byzantine court, appears before Christ, who crowns him. Richly dressed in the *loros*, the jewelled stole of the emperors, Roger inclines his head. The image copies the Byzantine model precisely, except that Roger's face is startling, for he resembles Christ. The mosaic asserts not only that the king is divinely appointed, but that kingship itself has a God-like character.

The Virgin Mary was the special patron both of the Ottonians and of the Norman kings of Sicily. It is interesting that both Otto III and Roger II lost their fathers as children and were brought up by their mothers. Otto's father died in 983 when he was three; Roger's in 1101, when he was five and a half. In both cases, their mothers ruled as regent in their stead. Theophano, mother of Otto III, was a Greek princess, who brought her religious civilization to the north with her; and Adelaide of Montserrat, Roger's mother, was a Ligurian, who, faced with the task of ruling an island only very recently pacified, spurned the Norman soldiers of her late husband in favour of Greeks (and Arabs) who knew Sicily well. This Oriental and exotic upbringing had a marked effect on Roger: a taste for Arabian-night pleasure gardens and for Byzantine customs in his worship were both formed by his childhood experiences. Thus the resemblance of the Madonna and child to the imperial regent and her son cannot have missed anyone in either the German or the Sicilian courts,

conscious as they were of the Greek concept that the emperor was Christ's vicar on earth.

At the same time as Adelaide reigned in Palermo, the Norman dominions of southern Italy were in the hands of other widows: Adela of Flanders held court in Naples during her son's minority; Constance of France in Taranto ruled as regent for her son. And at the end of the twelfth century, a formidable woman held the throne of France for her son, the future saint, Louis IX. The devotion of Blanche of Castile and her crusader son to the Virgin has no more eloquent testimonial than the cathedrals of Chartres and Paris, which they lavishly endowed.

By the reign of King Louis, another transformation of a Byzantine imperial image had entered the stream of western art: the coronation of the Virgin, one of western Christendom's favourite themes, first appears in the twelfth century, in the unforgettable apse mosaic of S. Maria in Trastevere, and on the powerful tympana of French cathedrals. The image was based on the Greek emperor's coronation by Christ or the Virgin, familiar from Byzantine mosaics and coins. But in the west the terrestrial sphere once again imposed its pattern on the heavens, and Christ was shown crowning his mother queen. It switched the moment of Mary's triumph from the Incarnation to the Assumption: she is crowned queen of heaven after death, as Andrew of Crete and John Damascene had described in their homilies on the feast of the Dormition when they applied Psalm 45 to the Virgin's royal progress into paradise. Although Maria Regina the Theotokos, as she appeared in S. Maria Antiqua or on John VII's icon, was eclipsed by this new scene, the metaphor of Mary's queenship still served to project authority's claims.

Émile Mâle, the great art historian, has attributed the invention of the image to Suger, abbot of St. Denis, the first masterwork of the Gothic style. A true iconodule, Suger believed in the stimulation of piety through pictures, pageants, and pleasure. "*Mens hebes,*" he wrote, "*ad rerum per materialia surgit*" (The dull mind rises up through material things).¹⁵ Suger married images to theology with remarkable flair for innovation and energy in execution. About ten years after the consecration of his sumptuously redecorated abbey church of St. Denis in 1140, Suger presented the old church of Notre Dame in Paris with a stained-glass window commemorating the triumph of the Virgin. The window survived the destruction of the old church and was incorporated into the thirteenth-century cathedral that still dominates Paris today; but it did not survive the iconoclasm of the Age of Reason. In the eighteenth century the art historian Le Vieil found it crude and smashed it. He

noted beforehand, however, that it depicted the triumph of the Virgin, and remarked on "the brilliance of the colours, especially the blue."¹⁶

The blue glass is irretrievable, and St. Denis stands defaced by a mob of the French Revolution. But Mâle believes the glass showed the Virgin crowned on Christ's right hand. Suger's novel iconography inspired the portals of other cathedrals of France: Senlis (c. 1170), Mantes (1180), Chartres (c. 1205-10), or the *Portail de la Vierge* at Notre Dame (c. 1210-20) and later at Strasbourg, Lyons, Longport. The theme appears in the twelfth-century glass of Canterbury cathedral, and the altarpieces of medieval Italy, where the Virgin takes her son's right hand like the queen of Ophir and receives her crown of glory—from him, or from an angel. In the west, the idea of apotheosis, at the heart of the Assumption, crystallized in the medieval centuries in the image of the Virgin's coronation.

Suger is the foremost example of the social mobility of the twelfth century: an obscure clerk of peasant stock, he rose rapidly to power, the beneficiary of the Capetian kings' policy of rejecting the hereditary barons in favour of servants who would repay their advancement with undivided loyalty. Suger was above all a royal minister, not a papal servant, and the gravitational tug of this prior commitment, evident in the art he influenced, made him affirm again and again the special sacredness of the kingly state. As Suger's king was Louis IX, whose saintliness was obvious to all, his task was thereby made a little easier.¹⁷

It was Suger who, in his flamboyant visual imagination, crystallized the iconography of the rod of Jesse, which shows Mary and the child springing from a line of kings (see figures 1, 13). It was during Suger's hegemony over French art and architecture that Queen Blanche of Castile, Louis's overpowering mother, gave the glorious rose window of the north transept to Chartres cathedral—the sparkling colours proclaim the Virgin Queen of Heaven.¹⁸ In a moralized Bible written and illuminated for the queen mother and her son around 1235, the royal mother and child appear side by side. Blanche is veiled and crowned, wrapped in an ermine-lined blue mantle over a simple belted russet tunic, and she holds up both hands as if in supplication to her son, who holds the orb and sceptre of kingship (figure 15).

Blanche's appearance reproduces exactly the appearance of the Virgin on the triumphant tympana of French cathedrals of her time. To the medieval French churchgoer, heaven resembled the court of his monarch, a palace inhabited by noble men and women. And the Virgin, in particular, looked like their suzerain's mother. Blanche herself identified so strongly with the religious ideal that she was buried in a nun's habit.

The image of the Virgin as queen is scored so deep in western imagination that many Catholics still think of her as a medieval monarch. When she appeared in visions at Knock in Ireland in 1879, and at Pontmain in France in 1871, she wore the long dress, sash, veil, and crown of the thirteenth-century feudal lady. The massed accumulation of images has frozen her into a costume plate.¹⁹

This was a rapid result of the extraordinary wave of adulation that raised eighty cathedrals in France within a century. In 1460, Jean Fouquet, illuminating a *Book of Hours* for Étienne Chevalier, painted his patron praying before a statue of the Madonna and child. Etienne, with his patron saint Stephen beside him, kneels in a Renaissance hall, with ornamental swags on the ceiling, a richly marbled floor, Corinthian columns, and frolicking putti. The Queen of Heaven opposite him sits on a high Gothic throne under an ogival arch, with angels and saints sculptured in the archivolts, as on the portals of Chartres or Notre Dame. Jean Fouquet and Étienne Chevalier had moved on with time, and their surroundings were "modern," but the Virgin and child had come to a standstill in Gothic. In the twelfth century, the Virgin was remote in rank; two hundred years later, she was remote in time as well.

The Virgin Queen had a spiritual dimension in the middle ages that was expressed more eloquently in the hymns than in the pictures that began circulating widely in the twelfth century.²⁰ [The antiphons of the Virgin invoke her as the lady of heaven (Dante's *donna del cielo*: Paradise 32:29), mistress of angels, queen of paradise, whose mercy can save the most abject sinner. The *Salve Regina* first appears in a Cistercian *antiphonarium* compiled in 1140, and five years later Peter, abbot of Cluny, prescribed it for the procession on the feast of the Assumption. It has been attributed to Adhemar, bishop of Le Puy, who led the first crusade and died in Antioch in 1098. Deeply melancholic, this cry from the depths paints all life on earth as exile from God. It pleads for the Queen of Heaven's mercy:]

Ad te clamamus, exules filii evae
Ad te suspiramus, gementes et flentes
In hac lacrimarum valle.

To thee we cry, banished children of Eve.
 To thee do we sigh, groaning and weeping
 In this vale of tears.

The crusaders may have sung it in the field—its delicate sadness would have made it one of history's strangest battle cries.

The *Regina Caeli*, attributed to Pope Gregory V (d. 999), and the *Ave Regina Caelorum* (not earlier than the tenth century), also became popular hymns from the end of the twelfth century. The new orders of monks promoted their recitation enthusiastically: the Franciscans included them in their breviary from 1249 onwards. In the circle of the Church Triumphant in Dante's *Paradise*, the souls sweetly sing the *Salve Regina*, as the Virgin rises to the higher spheres. Pope Clement VI introduced the four antiphons into the office of the Curia in 1350, and Pius V (1566–72), the reformer of the liturgy, prescribed the *Alma Redemptoris Mater*, as well as the three others, to be sung each canonical hour. The *Salve Regina* is still the Catholic world's best-loved hymn. At the shrine of Montserrat near Barcelona, the choir boys who are dedicated to the Virgin by their parents and live secluded in the monastery sing it at compline every evening. The old Benedictine plainsong has been discarded in favour of a more rousing nineteenth-century tune, but the power of the brief antiphon, with its haunting envoi, is overwhelming in the darkened monastery church, where the sanctuary lamps glow softly and the Black Madonna above glints in her gold and silver shrine:

*O clemens, o pia
O dulcis Maria*

O merciful, kind, sweet Mary

Mary as
Queen

The queenship of Mary expresses her signal triumph, through her virginity and her Assumption, over human weakness and evil; second, the modern theology of Maria Regina is grounded in her supremely efficient powers of intercession with Christ (see Chapter 19); furthermore, the association of Mary with the allegorical figure of the Church makes her regal authority an assertion of the Church's power. All these strata were present in the thought of Pope Pius XII when he officially proclaimed Mary as Queen of Heaven in 1954, four years after the proclamation of the Assumption.²¹ He could hardly have intended any medieval mimesis of earthly monarchs—Elizabeth II on the throne of England, Frederika in Greece, Juliana in the Netherlands were the few, unlikely exemplars holding their thrones. Rather, at a time of crisis in the faith and the Church, he was attempting to reassert Rome's influence.

But the symbol retains its temporal associations if only because it justifies the kind of economic tribute fit for a queen. At Saragossa, for instance, one of the few treasuries of the Virgin that has survived despoliation by bankrupt governments is hoarded behind heavy oaken doors

in the sacristy. The Virgin of the Pillar has been given crown after crown for her small and pretty head, necklaces and bracelets and brooches to adorn her, capes and robes barnacled in gems to wear on her feastsdays. Huge sunburst nimbi of thousands of diamonds, emeralds, and rubies frame her crowned head. The largest crown in her possession, containing over a million diamonds, was given by public subscription in 1905. Although Saragossa is uniquely rich, the phenomenon is widespread in the Catholic world: school children save their pennies or give away their wristwatches to shrines like Walsingham in England or Czestochowa in Poland so that the Queen of Heaven's statue or icon can wear a fitting crown.

It would be difficult to concoct a greater perversion of the Sermon on the Mount than the sovereignty of Mary and its cult, which has been used over the centuries by different princes to stake out their spheres of influence in the temporal realm, to fly a flag for their ambitions like any Maoist poster or party political broadcast; and equally difficult to imagine a greater distortion of Christ's idealism than this identification of the rich and powerful with the good.

*Mary as Queen reveals
Church's ambition
to rule on earth + also
indicates road to
pure + perfect life on
earth.*

and the
also be-
The new
Francis-
circle of
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