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# I. FIRST OF ALL

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In spiritual books, there's one phrase that keeps popping up, in all languages: "I know a priest who," or "there was a servant of God who," followed by the description of some elevated experience. Unless the reader is a complete idiot—and therefore shouldn't be reading the book anyway—he knows that the author is now talking about *himself*, and is so terribly humble, he can't possibly admit that's who it is. Saints have done this. St. Teresa many times "knew a nun who," for saints are really humble, but I'm sure they didn't mean to set a style.

I've read a lot of these books, and was just about to begin this one with "I know a housewife who often does her ironing wishing she owned the complete works of Tertullian." But let's not fool around. You would know perfectly well that the housewife is little ole me. This is a personal book, not because I want it to be, but because I'm a woman and can't write any other kind. If I started a commentary on St. Thomas Aquinas it would undoubtedly degenerate into what my children think of him, what questions I expect him to clarify for me in heaven and what essence and existence mean as applied to geraniums. Furthermore, if you think the situations and characters herein depicted are "purely fictitious and bear no resemblance, etc.," well, I can only say that's a pretty silly thing to say about any book.

I don't want to write this at all. As far as I know, my motives are purely cathartic, in the highest Greek sense. I'm writing because I just can't help it. For four years I figured this urge was a diabolic temptation to sneak out of my humdrum lot. In desperation, I trapped two Trappists in their own visitors' parlor and asked them point-blank how you tell a terrible temptation from an inspiration.

"Search us," they said cheerily. "It's a problem we struggle with all the time."

“But I have this horrible compulsion to write a book,” I confided shamefacedly.

“Well then, why don’t you?” they asked.

An answer like this springs from Holy Simplicity, which takes years of virtue to acquire. Never would it have occurred to me to cut the Gordian knot like that.

“Whatever you write, though,” they suggested, “please keep it light. The world is full of dull books.”

I’ll try.

Certainly if writing under difficulty produces great books, this one will be a humdinger. Though I’m not faced with the prospect of burning my own hair for warmth in a cold garret while my numbed fingers stumble across a re-used sheet of paper in a race to the death with creditors, I have other problems just as good in maintaining creative tensions: a husband and five children who expect to be fed at *all* the appointed times; a little terror who creeps out of the playpen into the wastebasket and chews the discarded typewriter ribbon; a female teenager who said (and I quote), “You’re going to write a book! Well, if you can, I can!” and has set to with a leaky pen upstairs; also, two horses who spend their days—and nights—inventing daring escapes out of our pasture into the neighbor’s tulip beds; a faulty water pump which must be kicked in zero weather; and our phone rings just as much as other people’s.

“Oh, blessed inconvenience!” as St. Mary Magdalen Postel would no doubt say. What untapped wealth of grace and virtue! I simply can’t let this opportunity slip by me. Despite all these odds—and I’m sure you’ll agree they’re odd—I’ve *got* to write a book.

You’ve heard of a comedian’s comedian? Well, I guess I’m setting myself up as a housewife’s housewife. That’s who’s writing it, and that’s whom it’s for. I’ve picked the biggest subject and the biggest reading public I could think of. There are millions of us. And one of us just happens to be the Queen of Heaven, of angels, prophets, martyrs, confessors, and the Mother of God Himself!

Writing about housewives can begin anywhere, lead anywhere, and end never. Keeping to the subject is going to be easy because

it covers everything, all knowledge, all human experience. Any science, attitude, talent or virtue can serve the housewife in her myriad roles. Can a being whose whole function is the extension and nourishment of society ever have too much food in the cupboard?

One adornment I've always felt I could safely do without is higher mathematics. Well, I have a son studying it now, and the other day he asked, "Mother, how do you visualize the square of a minus number?" I came clean and admitted I couldn't, but not without some sense of failure, like Old Mother Hubbard when she couldn't produce that bone.

Let me tell you, if I heard that one of you out there was studying cuneiform inscriptions or well drilling while the wash soaks, I'd cheer you on. They're bound to come in handy one of these days. I once picked up in the Library of Congress a pamphlet on chair caning written for the instruction of the feeble-minded in a useful trade, and I've been replacing chair seats around the house ever since. Do you know where I can get one on juggling? (Our stairs here are very narrow.)

But this is all incidental. The subject goes much deeper, as we all know. One stupendous fact stands out above all others, and it is this: When God chose a co-redemptrix to aid His beloved Son in the salvation of mankind, he could have picked a lady statistician, or a prophetess, a cook, a teacher, a charwoman, or Molly Pitcher. He could have picked a seamstress, a nurse, a woman philosopher or a bank clerk. But He didn't. He picked all of them. He picked a housewife.

She is Mary Immaculate, a laywoman and a daughter of Eve. He made her the channel of all the grace He pours into our fallen world—the astounding grace of redemption, of priesthood, of martyrdom, and every actual grace leading the lowliest sinner to Him.

This holy housewife is given to us not only as our spiritual mother, but as our model. An awesome thought! We can never imitate her at all unless we imitate her in her fundamental role—the mainspring of her sanctity—her role as a channel of grace. Every woman comes into the world to transmit life, supernatural or physical. Sometimes she is relieved of the duty of transmitting

physical life, but of spiritual life, never. This is what I think about when the teakettle whistles or the children burst in the front door, and I repeat, it's an awesome thought.

We call Mary "Spiritual vessel, Vessel of honor, Vessel of singular devotion, House of gold, Ark of the Covenant," because a woman must contain. In spite of herself, she gives what she contains.

Mary, who contained God, composed for us a very beautiful piece called The Magnificat. It's very feminine, very personal, and was produced without its interfering with the performance of any of her homely duties. I therefore humbly dedicate this little effort to her, put together as it is between the marketing and the washing, Holy Mass and the oven.

Ave, Maria, Gate of Heaven and Queen of Housewives, please: a blessing!