

**MARY: PROTOTYPICAL MYSTIC  
THE MARIAN LAUDS OF JACOPONE DA TODI**

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**INTRODUCTION**

Within the corpus of the 93 Lauds of Jacopone da Todi (c.1236-1306), the Franciscan poet-mystic of Umbria spends much time on charity, poverty, the Church, the soul's passionate love for Jesus Christ and, above all, his experience of mysticism as union with the Divine. He was among the first to write in a "vulgar" Italian (specifically Medieval Umbrian) rather than the Latin of the educated. As a result the masses had easy access to his poems which were, in fact, very popular because their "wording and [sounds] as such originally conveyed only homeliness."<sup>1</sup> Within these Lauds are three<sup>2</sup> gems concerning the Blessed Virgin Mary; actually, it is within the greater context of his Lauds that these poems need to be read. In so doing, one can envision Mary as the prototypical mystic according to the path of Franciscan spirituality, and we as Christians can grow spiritually in light of this Marian spirituality of a Franciscan orientation.

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<sup>1</sup> Serge and Elizabeth Hughes, *Jacopone da Todi: The Lauds* (Ramsey, NY: Paulist Press, 1982).

<sup>2</sup> Before twentieth century scholarship, many included the *Stabat mater dolorosa* within Jacopone's *oeuvre*. However this is not the case. See Hughes, as well as George T. Peck, *The Fool of God: Jacopone da Todi* (University, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1980). Thus, three Lauds directly concerning the Virgin Mary remain.

*The Sinner and the Blessed Virgin Mary* is a conversation between a sinner and Mary. The poem begins with the sinner coming to the Virgin in a state of frenetic despair:

O gracious Queen, heal, I beg of you, my wounded heart.  
Despairing, I come to you, confiding in you alone.  
Without your help I am ashes.  
My wound is past telling, my Lady, it festers.  
Hasten, help me. This suffering unravels me;  
The pain swells to a height, wails.<sup>3</sup>

The poem continues with a response from the Virgin who comforts the sinner immediately “Son, I hear your cry, / And gladly will I come to your side,”<sup>4</sup> but then offers some rather heavy suggestions, most of which conform to Jacopone’s rigorous Franciscan spirituality.<sup>5</sup> In the end, however, “God will cancel the debt and in your strength / You will ward off the blows of the Enemy.”<sup>6</sup>

The laud entitled *The Blessed Virgin Mary* is the most theological of the three lauds concerning the Virgin. In it we find the language of the Immaculate Conception, wording that posits an undamaged womb at the nativity, and a theology of the heavenly ascent of the Virgin in contradistinction to the worldly descent of her Son. This latter subject is of interest to us, and will be addressed below.

The third laud, *The Lament of the Virgin*, is by far the most consuming of his Marian lauds. The laud sets an impassioned conversation between a messenger, the Virgin, and her Son, moments before and during the crucifixion, bringing to life the suffering and threnody of any mother mourning the death of her son. For our purposes, this laud brings to light, in combination with the laud entitled *The Blessed Virgin Mary*, a Mariology that places Mary as the quintes-

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<sup>3</sup> Hughes, *Jacopone da Todi*, 69.

<sup>4</sup> Hughes, *Jacopone da Todi*, 69.

<sup>5</sup> Jacopone stresses spiritual and physical poverty, controlled appetite, and eliminated vanities.

<sup>6</sup> Hughes, *Jacopone da Todi*, 69.

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sential mystic who climbs the ladder to the Divine and experiences ecstasy in union with the Word (annunciation and nativity), only to plunge to the abyss of the “dark night of the soul” (Mary at the crucifixion) that so many mystics have experienced. Whether or not this was the intention of Jacopone is a moot point, but we must recall that as a mystic, his intentions occasionally transcend implied deliberateness and enter into the realm of theosophical interpretation. In other words, the premeditations of a mystical author are multivalent and need to be read as such.

### *The Lauds*

We will focus on the two lauds that directly address our thesis (*The Blessed Virgin Mary* and *The Lament of the Virgin*). These two lauds, in combination with his overall representation of the mystical life, present Mary as the paradigmatic mystic. For Jacopone, a Franciscan was to empty himself both physically and spiritually in order to be a true follower of poverty. He went further and followed in the path of St. Francis, himself a mystic, and described the effects of such emptying in Laud 91:

The doors open wide, and entering within  
The soul becomes one with God,  
Possesses what He possesses ...  
Because it has renounced all  
That is not divine,  
I now hold in its grasp  
The unimaginable Good  
In all its abundance[.]<sup>7</sup>

Laud 66 then describes the dark night of the soul:

I seek out Your nativity, Lord,  
Seek out Your suffering;  
There is no joy in the quest,

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<sup>7</sup> Hughes, *Jacopone da Todi*, 62.

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For love has gone cold ...  
Contemplating my own grief I weep,  
The dry tears of a heart in ruins.  
That precious, inaccessible sweetness—  
Where has it gone?<sup>8</sup>

A protracted list of other lauds could be given that exemplify Jacopone's mystical theology of poverty and the dark night. However, the purpose of these citations is simply to have a reference point in order that we may address his Marian hymns in relation to his overall theology and spirituality.

*The Blessed Virgin Mary* is a nativity poem that delves deep into the person of Mary. In addition to expounding upon her Immaculate Conception and her rather (amazingly) painless labor that left her womb undamaged, Jacopone elevates the status of Mary:

You carry God within you, God and man,  
And the weight does not crush you ...

O salamander-heart, living in flame,  
How is it that love did not consume you utterly?  
Fortitude sustained you, and steadies the burning heart.  
Yet the humility of the child dwarfed yours:  
With your acceptance you ascended in glory;  
He, instead, abased Himself, descended to wretched  
state.<sup>9</sup>

It appears that Mary embodies what St. Irenaeus of Lyon, and countless other writers after him, wrote about humanity's deification: God became man so that man might become God. Theologian after theologian have written about the extreme humility of Mary, and Jacopone takes this concept to show that Mary then "ascended in glory." For Jacopone—as the true Franciscan that he was—humility and poverty were

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<sup>8</sup> Hughes, *Jacopone da Todi*, 37.

<sup>9</sup> Hughes, *Jacopone da Todi*, 71.

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the *sine qua non* for the proper spiritual life oriented toward Christ, not to mention the mystical life. As Laud 91 (cited above) illustrates, only after renouncing all can the true mystic's soul enjoy ecstatic union with the Divine. Mary, as an exemplar of humility, did precisely that: she humbly did God's will and was given union with the Word in her bearing of the Son of God.

Above, we cited Laud 66 as an example of the dark night of the soul, and Jacopone's *The Lament of the Virgin*, using Mary as the mystic, shares this same theme to an extreme degree. For in this laud, Divine Love,

... permits the possibility of union between the tragic existence of humanity and the supernatural dimension; God and Man [unite] in the sharing of suffering.<sup>10</sup>

One cannot but come to tears in reading this laud, for it places on the lips of Jesus and His mother a dialogue of agony. The laud begins with the messenger informing Mary of her Son's arrest, beating, and soon-to-come death:

Lady, Queen of Heaven, they have taken your son;  
Hurry, come and see—they're beating Him,  
Whipping Him brutally; they will kill him;<sup>11</sup>

Mary replies in shock:

How can this be? My son, who has done no wrong,  
My hope—how could they have taken Him?

The dialogue between the messenger and the Virgin continues, the former relaying what has happened, and the latter receiving the news in a state of stupefaction:

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<sup>10</sup> S.E. Ennio Cardinal Antonelli, *Jacopone da Todi: Il sentiero dell'anima* (Todi, Italy: Tau Editrice, 2008), 4.

<sup>11</sup> This laud is taken from Hughes, *Jacopone da Todi*, 278-80.

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My son, my son, my son, my loving lily,  
Who can console me in my anguish?  
Son whose gentle eyes once smiled on me,  
Why do you not answer me?  
Why hide from the mother who nursed You?

Finally, Mary arrives at Calvary and her Son, upon seeing  
His mother, wails

Mother,<sup>12</sup> why have you come?  
Your agony and tears crush Me;  
*To see you suffer so will be My death. (emphasis mine)*

We reproduce the section in full:

(Mary)  
My anguish is without cause;  
*O my Son, Father and Spouse, (emphasis mine)*  
Who was it wounded and stripped you?

(Jesus)  
Mother, weep no more; stay and help  
Those dear to Me, the friends I leave behind.

(Mary)  
Son, do not ask this of me; *let me die with You.*  
Let me breathe my last here at Your side.  
*A common grave for son and mother,*  
*Since ours is a common agony. (emphasis mine)*

Jesus then gives Mary to John as his Mother, and then  
breathes his last. Mary ends with a poignant elegy:

My Son, You have breathed Your last;  
Son of a mother frightened and dazed,

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<sup>12</sup> Jacopone conveys an intimate affection whenever Jesus addresses the Blessed Virgin, for he does not put “Madre” (lit., mother) on the lips of Christ, but rather the more familiar “mamma.”

Son of a Mother destroyed by grief,  
Tortured, tormented Son!  
Son without peer, fair and rosy-cheeked,  
To whom shall I turn now that You have left me?  
Why did the world so despise You?  
Gentle and sweet Son, Son of a sorrowful mother,  
How cruelly You have been treated!  
John, my new son, your brother is dead:  
The sword they prophesied has pierced my heart.  
*They have killed both mother and son,  
One cruel death for both,  
Embracing each other and their common cross!*  
(emphasis mine)

The theological and mystical implications of this laud are multifarious and noteworthy. To begin, Jesus' mother has such an influence on him that he appears to not suffer until her arrival, and in fact it is *her* suffering that will be *his* death. The pain of a mother losing a child bleeds through this laud, and the reader can almost undergo the suffering alongside the Blessed Virgin (a very real "com-passion"). Her emotional torment affects both the reader and Jesus, for Mary cannot imagine life without her Son and expresses herself appropriately ("Let me die with You!"). In fact, she spiritually and emotionally suffers alongside the physical passion of her Son, to the point that she exclaims, "They have killed both mother and son ... embracing ... a common cross."

While this may be the traditional, albeit emotionally amplified, version of a *Mater Dolorosa*, an additional conclusion can be drawn. When this dirge, along with the preposterous (though only on a superficial level) statement of Mary's, "O my Son, Father, and Spouse," are read within the context of Jacopone's other lauds, we can see Mary as the quintessential mystic of Franciscan spirituality. She is the Christian who has emptied herself in humility in order to make room for the Divine, which brings both sublime ecstasy (cf. *The Blessed Virgin Mary* Laud, above) and wretched suffering (much akin to the dark night of the soul). Union with the Christ means suffering alongside him as well. This is pre-



cisely what Mary is doing in this Laud, and she does so in a hyperbolic fashion: she is the only human who experienced *real* union with the Word (in carrying the Word made flesh within her) and *real* separation (in witnessing the Word that was once within her die an agonizing death). Mary is thus the archetypical Christian mystic.

Lest we be left with a theology that affects but a handful in this world, for ordinary mystics are few and far between, these Marian lauds also enter into the lives of all Christians, for we are all extraordinary mystics in our own way. Antonelli, in his selective translations, sums up the importance of the Marian lauds succinctly:

The Virgin Mary constitutes, as it is for the other mystics, a constant point of reference within the journey of the soul of Brother Jacopone and takes such an important place within it that, almost all of the stages of [Jacopone's] life versified in the Lauds carry [her] print. Mary, therefore, constitutes a model for the journey for all Christians.<sup>13</sup>

For Jacopone, the model Christian must empty himself in spiritual and material poverty and be ready to receive the Word in times of both joy (Mary's glory as the Mother of God) and despair (Mary's dark night of the soul at the foot of the cross). Thus, Jacopone is offering his readers an *imitatio Mariae* for the major mystic, as well as for the minor mystic within all Christians. As Christians, we must be aware that following Christ entails an emptying of the self in order that the Word made Flesh may penetrate and fill us, but this is followed at times with suffering as we imitate Christ's "compassion." In other words, we find both sublime bliss and a "suffering-with" in Christ. That said, it would be refreshing to retrieve the theme of "Mary as quintessential mystic," beginning with the Lauds of the Franciscan, Jacopone da Todi.

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<sup>13</sup> Antonelli, *Il sentiero dell'anima*, 21.