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Queen of Queens

The Virgin Mary in an anonymous Cistercian sermon collection from early thirteenth-century Sweden

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Stephan Borgehammar:

“Queen of Queens: The Virgin Mary in an anonymous Cistercian sermon collection from early thirteenth-century Sweden”

Let me begin by quoting from the sermon collection which is my topic. The following is from a sermon on the Assumption of Mary, August 1:

Today, the Blessed Virgin Mary has ascended into heaven. Rejoice, my beloved, for she reigns with Christ in eternity. Today, the Blessed Virgin Mary has been received in heaven with great joy and happiness by angels and archangels and the whole heavenly host. Once again, rejoice! She resides in eternal glory with Christ her Son. Just as one speaks of the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords, so is the blessed Mary called Virgin of Virgins and Queen of Queens. All elected human souls are in this life queens of Almighty God, our Saviour, in so far as they rule themselves well. After this life, they will be concubines, when they lie down to rest in eternal life. The Virgin Mary, however, surpasses all these queens and concubines and is admired even by the angels. Therefore, my beloved, be glad, and let the whole earth rejoice, for no-one intercedes for us who is closer to Almighty God than his own Mother, the blessed Mary, who today ascended into heaven and reigns with Christ in all eternity.

Who spoke these solemn words, and in what circumstances? The manuscript they come from belonged to the Cistercian abbey of Alvastra in Sweden. Alvastra and its sister foundation Nydala (Nova Vallis) were both founded in 1143 as the first Cistercian abbeys in Sweden, indeed in all Scandinavia – the fortieth and forty-first daughter foundations of Clairvaux. The order spread in Sweden in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and a final foundation was made in 1486 in Gudsberga, “The Mountain of God”, so called because this monastery had its income from mines (it was the world’s northernmost Cistercian house). In all, medieval Sweden had six Cistercian monasteries and seven nunneries. Quite a lot, considering how sparsely populated the country was.

The libraries and archives of the Swedish Cistercians are almost completely lost. All that remains are a few manuscript fragments, a number of legal documents, three whole manuscripts and one printed book.

My initial quotation was from one of the three whole manuscripts, today in Uppsala University Library with the shelf mark C37. A note on its first leaf says that it belonged to Alvastra Abbey: “Liber Sancte Marie de Alwastro”. The manuscript has three separate parts: First, a work on liturgy by John Beleth, *Summa de ecclesiasticis officiis*, copied around 1250; secondly, our sermon collection, copied somewhat earlier, near the beginning of the thirteenth century; and thirdly, a rather rare late antique work on the wife of Joseph the patriarch, called Liber Aseneth.

The sermon collection seems to be an original work. Textual parallels can be found in earlier sermons and Biblical commentaries, but they are not very close. Moreover, the sermons do not seem to be quite finished. They are well-written, but there are occasional language errors and occasional slight lacunae *or* redundancies in the argument, which suggest that the author had a draft he could use for preaching, but which was not yet quite ready for publication. Our text seems to be a fair copy of that draft, with corrections made by one or two slightly later hands, corrections that are not always appropriate.

The ordering of the sermons also strongly suggests that this is a work that was being prepared for publication but never reached completion. The surviving copy in Uppsala C 37 contained 38 complete sermons and one incomplete. Due to loss of a quire, the number is now 32 complete and 3 incomplete sermons. Thanks to a medieval index, the original contents can be reconstructed. Basically, this is an ordered collection of Sunday and festal sermons covering the period from the Second Sunday of Advent to the Fourth Sunday after the Easter octave. Nine sermons in the series do not appear in their proper order but stand at the end of the series. At the very end we find three sermons for feasts that occur *after* the paschal season: John the Baptist (June 24), St. Michael (Sept. 29) and the Assumption of Mary (Aug. 15). The sermon for the Assumption is lost and is incomplete – it breaks off in mid-sentence, with a doxology supplied by a later hand.

If this sermon collection was truly written in Alvastra, it would not only be the *only* surviving sample of Cistercian preaching from medieval Sweden, it would also be the earliest surviving sermon collection from that country. But how can we know? The only way is to read the sermons carefully, which I have done, and to search for clues in them as to their origin and purpose. I have formed an opinion, but I am not at all sure of it, and hope you will help me to ascertain whether I am on the right track or not.

Let us first look at the general character of the sermons. Are they monastic or popular? The evidence is ambiguous. The *form* of the sermons is that of homilies, i.e. they expound the Gospel text verse by verse. This method was commonly used in monastic preaching throughout the twelfth century and perhaps longer, whereas the popular sermon in that period seems to have been freer in form (e.g. Honorius, the Old Norse homily book, other vernacular sermons). But there is no reason to suppose that the homily form was used exclusively when preaching to monks. A monk who was used to it could surely have employed it when preaching to lay people, for instance.

In terms of content, the Alvastra sermons also show many similarities with monastic preaching in the twelfth century. They frequently use allegory in order to expound the Biblical text and make it relevant, and many of the allegories are commonplace in monastic homilies. Their ultimate source is occasionally the Gospel homilies of Gregory the Great. But the Alvastra homilies also seem to differ in significant ways from the usual monastic homily: they have little to say about the interior life of prayer and contemplation. The theme of *visitatio*, for instance, of God's visits to the soul, which is so prominent in, e.g., the twelfth-century Benedictine sermons from Admont in Austria, is conspicuously absent. The same goes for the moral (or mystical) mode of allegory, i.e. the application of Scripture to the interior life of the soul. The allegories in the Alvastra homilies all concern Christian doctrine and morals in the exterior sense of right action.

My sense, then, is that the Alvastra sermons were written by a monk, but for preaching to a lay audience. This is perhaps corroborated by a passage in the sermon for Maundy Thursday. Let me quote it to you!

In accordance with the example of Our Lord Jesus Christ, many faithful, both good men and well-educated women, today gather the poor and sick, the blind and the deaf, wash their feet, give them water for their hands, and distribute food and clothing to them, insofar as they are able. In this way they fulfil the Lord's behest, namely that what I have done for you, you also shall do. But since the Lord's Supper is celebrated on this holy day, and the Lord himself today blessed his body and blood and gave to his disciples, I urge you, my beloved, that just as the holy Apostles today received the Lord's body and blood, which the Lord himself had consecrated, so you, too, should step forward to the Lord's table, with tears, with repentance and veneration, while accusing yourselves before the Lord's face with fear and reverence and hoping to receive forgiveness for your sins. But if someone is conscious of being sullied by grave sins and has not done penitence or confessed to his

priest, it is better that he should abstain from the divine altar than approach presumptuously.

I feel the whole tenor of this passage is that of a priest or a monk giving spiritual counsel to lay people. At the same time, you may have noticed, toward the end of the quotation, the remark that the listener may have committed a grave sin and not “confessed to his priest”. This suggests that the audience is not in their parish church but visiting (say) a monastery. Maybe it also indicates that the listeners are upper class people who have family chaplains? However that may be, I feel that the theory which best fits the facts is that these sermons were composed by a monk, well acquainted with the themes and methods of monastic preaching, for delivery to a lay audience of both men and women. This means that they were intended to be delivered in the vernacular. This theory of course does not preclude the possibility that they in their written Latin form were *also* intended to be read for spiritual benefit by monks and clergy.

However, even if the evidence suggests a monastic origin for these sermons, we have not yet established whether they were composed in Alvastra or merely copied there. The facts that they exist nowhere else and seem to have been copied from an unfinished draft support an origin in Alvastra, but they are not proof. Nor does the content of the sermons offer much help. One passage in the sermon for the Second Sunday of Advent suggests that the author lived in a recently evangelized region. Commenting upon the words in Luke 21:25 that there will be signs in the sun and the moon before the end comes, the author writes:

The signs that will appear in the moon are (1) the mystery of the Lord’s resurrection, i.e. the sacrament of Christ’s body and blood; (2) purification and liberation from sin in baptism; (3) the fact that heathen kings and chieftains have submitted to the yoke of faith and stopped persecuting Christians; (4) that the Church has spread to where heathen rites used to be practised; and that monasteries and churches are now being built there, bishops consecrated, priests and deacons ordained and synods held.

This is by no means an obvious reference to twelfth-century Sweden, but it does make sense if it is.

A last piece of the puzzle, which I haven’t been able to fit in anywhere, is found in the sermon on St. Michael, where the author says: “We celebrate today not only the feast of St. Michael and all the holy angels, but also the consecration of this church”. Unfortunately, we

do not know whether the church of Alvastra Abbey was indeed consecrated on the day of St. Michael (Sept. 29).

I will now leave the critical questions and use the rest of my time to say something about how the Virgin Mary is depicted in the Alvastra sermons. What they say about Mary is not remarkable, but instructive.

Firstly, Mary is always regarded in relation to her son. Her importance derives entirely from the fact that she is the mother of Jesus. Secondly, there is an emphasis on her virginity. The preacher emphasizes *semper virgo*, that Mary was a virgin before, during and after giving birth. He mentions this as a sign, compatible to the miracles of Jesus. He also recalls Old Testament prefigurations of Mary's virginity, such as Hezechiel's vision of the Temple, where a prince walked in and out of a closed door (Hes. 44:1–5). The prince is Christ and Mary is the door that was closed because, says the preacher, "she was immaculate".

In the sermon for the Third Sunday of Advent, Mary is held forth as an example of the virtue of obedience, when she submits to the words of the angel Gabriel. Another example of her obedience is when she performs the ritual of purification after giving birth, despite being already pure. "Even though she had been greeted by an angel", says the preacher, "even though she was the Lord's mother, even though she was Queen of the heavens and the angels, she thought of the Lord's word when he said: 'He who humiliates himself shall be exalted' (Matth. 23:12), and she wanted to submit to the Law in order to give everyone an example." We see here that Mary's obedience is an active obedience. Another example of her active role in salvation is when the preacher explains that she imparted knowledge about her Son to the apostles and evangelists.

The preacher occasionally alludes to well-known Marian antiphons, for instance when he explains that her name means "Star of the sea" – his audience would have recognized the reference to the antiphon *Ave maris stella*. Elsewhere, he quotes *Gaude, Maria virgo* and perhaps alludes to *Ave regina caelorum*. It is notable, however, that the very emotional language of the latter, more recent text is foreign to the sermons.

The traditional use of Mary as a figure of the Church is present in the sermons. When expounding the words in Luke's gospel, "Blessed is the womb that bore you and blessed the breasts that you have sucked," the preacher says that the whole Church agrees with this praise of Mary; at the same time, however, the words can be transferred to the Church itself, which carries all the faithful and gives them milk from its two breasts, the Old and New Testaments.

But what about the tragic Mary, Mary at the foot of the Cross? She is present too, but not prominent. In the Good Friday sermon, she is entirely absent. There is no *Stabat mater*

dolorosa, which became so popular in the later Middle Ages. But in the sermon for Candlemas we read that Mary lived a life of tears and sorrow. She was like the holy martyrs in her suffering, because she stood at the foot of the Cross and watched her Son suffer. In the sermon for the Sunday after the Octave of Epiphany, the preacher comments on Jesus' harsh words to Mary in the Gospel of John: "Let me be, woman, for my time is not yet come." He explains that Christ here wishes to emphasize that his power to work miracles does not come from Mary, but from his being the Son of God. However, his ability to suffer is from Mary, and this she will realize when his time has come and he hangs on the Cross. (The preacher explains that it is as if He said to her: "When you see me hanging on the Cross, then you will see what you have given birth to. My divinity I did not get from you, only my humanity.")

Finally, I have collected some beautiful imagery for you. In the sermon for Candlemas, the preacher takes a passage from Ecclesiasticus, where wisdom is compared to various trees (Ecclus. 24:13–15) and applies it partly to Mary. She is a Cedar on Mt. Lebanon. The Cedar tree is always green. This signifies the angels, which are always verdant before God, but also Mary, who is verdant with all virtues and lived an angelic life on earth. She is also like an Olive tree. The olive produces oil, which signifies mercy. In Mary is Christ, the fount of mercy, who was born from her for the salvation of all.

Finally, we have Mary as an image of Paradise. According to Genesis, God planted a garden of delights in Eden with a spring issuing forth from the middle and dividing into four rivers. The term "garden of delight" suits the blessed Mary, says the preacher, for the many virtues that God planted in her flow to us. The spring issuing from her is Christ, who is born from her, and the four rivers are the four gospels that proceed from Christ. They water the whole world with his teaching.

These words about Paradise are in the last sermon of the collection, which unfortunately is unfinished. I began this talk by citing from the beginning of that sermon. Let me end now by returning to the quotation, as it may be said to be an epitome of what the Alvastra sermons have to say about the Virgin Mary:

Just as one speaks of the King of kings and the Lord of Lords, so is the blessed Mary called Virgin of Virgins and Queen of Queens. [...] No-one intercedes for us who is closer to Almighty God than his own Mother, the blessed Mary, who today ascended into heaven and rules with Christ in all eternity.