

Our Lady Seat of Wisdom

An Extract from Notes and News 2007

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As Mary brought Jesus to us all,
we hope to bring Him to those individuals
– adults & children –
who are unable to use other resources.
We do this directly by postal courses & email
through the catechists we train and support,
and in occasional meetings.

In humility we place ourselves before the Seat of Wisdom.

While I was sitting here at my desk, wondering what I was going to write in this letter, my eyes fell on the image of Our Lady and the Child Jesus that we have at the heading of all our literature. It struck me how right it is that we should have this picture as the symbol of our identity.

It is a common enough representation of the Madonna and Child, of the type that is normally known as the “Seat of Wisdom”. There are some elements that are included in most representations of this sort:

Christ is shown as an infant or a young child.

(In ancient depictions of the same subject He is often shown being, or about to be, nursed).

But the face is that of a more mature little man sitting or standing on Mary’s knee;

Our Lady enthroned, with a crown on her head, and in this case, with a sceptre resting over her arm;

Jesus is shown with royalty: he is holding an orb, He has a Halo with a cross inside it (“cruciform nimbus”). In some other pictures, He is shown with a crown or some other image of royalty.

And yet He is also shown with bare feet.

It is obvious that this image is not a picture or a representation of family life at Nazareth. Mary did not go around wearing a royal crown while she was doing the washing, nor did Jesus play with other children illuminated by a shining halo. Instead this picture is about catechesis, and it is concerned with divine motherhood and the Incarnation.

The halo and cross around Our Lord's head is associated with the image of the "Pantocrator", the Almighty: it points to His divinity. But at the same time, the image stresses His humanity: He is a child, even needing to be nursed; He is barefooted (this indicated humanity in iconography because feet are associated with humanity while the head is associated with divinity). So the way Our Lord is portrayed in this picture gives us the doctrine of the Incarnation: Christ is truly God and truly man.

If we look now at Mary, we can ask why she is crowned and enthroned? It is obviously a sign of royalty, or importance. But throughout history (especially in the high Middle Ages when this image really became popular) there has been a tendency for royal and important ladies to employ a wet nurse – looking after a child was considered beneath them. So there is an intentional paradox here between royalty and humility. The humble has been exalted, just as Christ humbled Himself to be born of her. The humble maiden of Nazareth has been exalted by God and has been given the title of "Mother of God", the Queen Mother.

The people who designed this ancient image of the "Seat of Wisdom" wanted to illustrate these important doctrines. Thus, the picture that we use is more than decoration, it is a statement of intent, an exercise in catechesis. It should also inspire our spirituality.

A great champion of Our Lady, St Louis de Montfort, wrote: "If we really wish to obtain life everlasting let us acquire knowledge of Divine Wisdom; To know Jesus Christ, Eternal Wisdom, is to know enough; to know everything and not to know him is to know nothing."

And how do we know this divine wisdom? St Louis says that the greatest means of all, is by having a tender and true devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. "Our Lady is the Seat of Wisdom because She was the creature who knew and loved God most, contemplating Him in the universe... Once we possess Mary we shall easily and in a short time possess Divine Wisdom through her intercession. Of all the means to possess Jesus Christ, Mary is the surest, the easiest, the shortest way and the holiest...And the best way to belong entirely to Mary is, so to speak, take Mary into our house by consecrating ourselves unreservedly to her as her servants and slaves. To surrender into her hands all we possess. And then, this good Mistress, who never allows herself to be outdone in liberality, will give herself to us, in an incomprehensible but real manner, and then Eternal Wisdom will come to dwell in her as in His glorious throne room."

Our Lady, Seat of Wisdom, pray for us.