fidelity to the truth of the gospel and to the law of Christ — by the steadfastness and purity of her faith, that is, and by her total dedication to the love of God and neighbor. These very qualities are also the source of her spiritual fruitfulness as the devoted 'mother' of Christ — that is, of all Christ's members, the redeemed.

Such, then, is the Church, that new Eve which the liturgy invites us to contemplate in Mary as in a mirror. For as Fathers of the Church had declared as early as the second century, Mary too is the new Eve. And when the readings, chants, and prayers of ancient Masses present Mary not only as the mother of Christ but even as the virgin bride of Christ, the Church is simply recognizing and celebrating in the new Eve who is Mary her own spiritual reality. For only as the prototype of the Church would Christ's Mother be called his bride, though without exaggeration.

As the most exalted member of the Church, as virgin of virgins and mother of Christ, Mary is obviously espoused to Christ in faith and holiness, in grace and charity. By faith and the grace of baptism, is not each individual Christian soul consecrated a spouse of Christ within that spouse of Christ which is the Church? How much more the holy Virgin, who is the original pattern or archetype of the Church and, as God-bearer, gave the world — and the Church — a Redeemer? Small wonder, then, that on Mary's feasts the Church should continue to ponder and extol this prerogative of virgin bride of Christ, no less than the divine motherhood.

Because of her close resemblance to the Church, Mary can readily symbolize or personify this holy assembly of the redeemed. In addition, Mary actually embodies the Church as its divinely chosen and ideal representative. In this she verifies within the Christian community the Semitic principle of solidarity which is so prominent in the Bible. By nature as well as by the will of God, according to this general principle, an ancestor represents his whole 'house' or 'race' and even contains all his descendants truly present within him, whether for good or for ill.

Thus Abraham, Edom, Israel, Judah, Joseph, Aaron, David, and others are identified, even by name, with their posterity, and the most distant generations are assigned to them directly as their 'sons.' The whole human race was present in Adam — and in Christ, the second Adam. Mary's special position is that of the new Eve, the exemplar from whom the people of God derives its title of new Eve as well as its key prerogatives and who also serves as its personal and idealized embodiment.

Often the Church and Mary are, on this account, almost indistinguishable, as in the celebrated description of the Woman in chapter 12 of the Apocalypse, or in the representation of women as orants in sacred art. (These standing figures with hands uplifted and outstretched in worship are generally identified as the 'praying Church'; yet in the twelfth-century apses of Cefalù and Murano the orant is undoubtedly Mary.) Again, because of their remarkable similarity, a shrine to the Holy Mother of God will necessarily enshrine Holy Mother Church. Neither in their images nor as objects of devotion can the two be wholly separated.

The Church has, in fact, been an object of veneration from the early centuries — a tradition paralleled in the natural order by a citizen's devotion to his country. Thus Saint Augustine could say: 'We receive the Holy Spirit only if we love the Church, if we are joined together by charity, if we delight in the Catholic name and faith. . . . Let us love the Lord our God, let us love his Church: the former as our father, the latter as our mother; the former as our lord, the latter as his handmaid — for, We are the children of his handmaid.'

How, we may now ask, is this sacred image, the Throne of Wisdom, to function in its devotional setting? What is its role? Foremost and of its very nature it is a sacramental: the sign of a supernatural presence and power, created to lead the beholder through its outward form to inner spiritual reality.

In the Throne of Wisdom the mortal life of Christ and his virgin Mother, especially the cherished years of his infancy, are of course recalled, but only as background. The controlling purpose of the image is rather to convey a fresh awareness of the triumphal glory of Son and Mother as they now are, in heaven, while at the same time evoking their active and personal communion with all the faithful in the Church today — Christ as Redeemer and Lord, Mary as the first of the redeemed and the prototype of the people of God. A sacramental image is not a purely psychological reminder of the past. Like the ikons of the Byzantine Rite, it exists to manifest an objective spiritual presence and thus awaken faith in the unseen and eternal realities of the supernatural world.

As an Epiphany sacramental, this sculpture heralds and even anticipates the hour of Christ's coming in glory, when the entire city of God, whether dwelling on earth or forming his heavenly court, will assemble to meet its King and reign with him forever.

Benedict R. Avery, O.S.B.