The Story Behind the Hymn, Salve Regina

We Marists sing the *Salve Regina* at the conclusion of special gatherings such as assemblies, chapters, celebrations of Marian feast days, Profession Ceremonies, and funerals of Marists.[1]

Most people, though, are unfamiliar with the story of this hymn's composer, Hermann Contractus. His name means Hermann the Lame. As descriptive as this is, it still does not do justice to capturing the crippling deformities and the emotional and psychological pain he endured throughout his 41 years. He could neither stand nor write without experiencing pain and had to sit in a specially constructed chair to support his spine's unique curvature. He also suffered from a cleft palate, making his speech difficult to understand. Later in life, he went blind and began writing hymns, including the well-known *Salve Regina*.

Elizabeth Ruth Obbard, in her book, "A Year with Mary: Prayers and Readings for Marian Feasts and Festivals," tells his fascinating story. In 1020, his parents presented him to the local Benedictine monastery in Reichenau, knowing that this was the only way for their son to be given the care he needed. The monastery accepted Hermann, who arrived as a child, seven years old. Hermann had no choice but to accept this arrangement since there were no other alternatives.

You can imagine how devastating such physical deformities could be to a person's sense of self-worth and how easy it would be to become bitter toward life and God. Remarkably, this did not happen to this "little monk," as he was affectionately called. His biographer describes him as "friendly, easy to talk to, always laughing, eagerly cheerful, obliging…" Whereas you might expect the other members of the community to resent having to put up with someone who needed so much help and who could do seemingly next to nothing in return, the community grew to love him. Instead of burdening them, he was a joy to have around!

Hermann's lively and inquisitive mind led him to learn math, astronomy, and science. He read the classical authors to converse with the other monks about topics other than his health. He even learned to use his gnarled hands to make clocks and musical instruments, write a life of Christ, a scientific treatise, and compose music. Hermann found a way to make life pleasant for the other monks, and his presence greatly enriched the community. The other monks greatly valued having Hermann in their community. To them, he was an absolute gem!

He did find one woman who loved him for who he was, and he constantly turned to her throughout his life. For him, she was his Queen and mother, his sweetness and his hope. Is it not true that when children are hurt, they instinctively run to their mothers? Something about being a woman and a mother seems ideally suited to soothing, calming, and healing an injured soul. Hermann, too, needed that kind of solace and found it in Mary, the mother of Jesus, who was his mother and is our mother as well.

If we want to see the feminine face of God, Mary comes closest to revealing that to us. It seems to me that God has delegated to Mary that particular role. When Hermann felt banished from enjoying so many beautiful aspects of life that we take for granted and when his words of anguish

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[1] For a quick summary of the *Salve Regina* and its place in Marist history from the perspective of the Marist Teachings Brothers, go to https://files.constantcontact.com/920f2439001/bfce718f-f101-4695-8318-e077cae4fc68.pdf.

gave way to sighs and weeping over what would never be for him, Hermann turned his gaze toward Mary. She, in turn, looked upon him with eyes of mercy and kindness and directed his attention to her son to reassure Herman that amid his suffering, Christ was closer to him than he may think or circumstances may suggest otherwise. Hermann drew inspiration from the cross of Christ and found ways to love the monks of his community while carrying the cross of his own unique and terrible suffering. In this way, his life shone forth with radiance as dazzling as any diamond.

I am reminded of the story of St. Lawrence, the deacon. He lived during the persecution of Emperor Valerian and was in charge of administering charity to the poor under Pope St. Sixtus. One day, the prefect of Rome demanded that Lawrence hand over the Church's treasures to the Roman authorities. Lawrence gathered the poor whom he had fed, clothed, and befriended and brought them to the prefect and said to him, "These are the treasures of the Church." Neither amused nor impressed, the Roman prefect sentenced Lawrence to death.

The real treasures of the Church are the people who are conformed to Christ and whose goodness and holiness are more precious in the sight of God than any priceless gem. In other words, the holy lives of Mary's sons and daughters are the precious stones that make up her royal crown. The dazzling and spectacular, holy life of Hermann Contractus makes it a most suitable gem worthy of a place of honor on her royal diadem.

That is Elizabeth Ruth Obbard's point in her reflection on Hermann Contractus and his connection with the feast of the Queenship of Mary[2]. She concludes her remarks by saying,

> "No one is so handicapped that God cannot act through them. No one is excluded from Mary's love for all her children. Hermann could have sulked and complained at his twisted limbs and weak extremities. Instead, he is remembered for his holiness, which makes the crown of the Mother of God shine with splendor."[3]

The next time you feel abandoned and severely handicapped compared to the abilities and advantages that others enjoy, remember Hermann Contractus. Be like him and turn to Mary, your Queen, and mother. Pray with all your heart the prayer that came from the heart of the "little monk."

Hail, holy Queen, Mother of Mercy,
Hail, our life, our sweetness, and our hope.
To you do we cry, poor children of Eve.
To you do we send up our sighs,
mourning and weeping in this vale of tears.
Turn, then, most gracious advocate,
your eyes of mercy toward us;
and after this, our exile,
show unto us the blessed fruit of your womb, Jesus.

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[2] Obbard, Elizabeth Rubbard, A Year with Mary: Prayers and Readings for Marian Feasts and Festivals, Twenty-Third Publications, Mystic, CT, 1999, pp. 155 – 157.
[3] Ibid., p.157

O clement, O loving, O sweet Virgin Mary.[4]

Hermann Contractus, 1054

[4] St. Bernard added the concluding words of the Salve Regina: " O clement, O loving, O most sweet Virgin Mary," possibly in the year 1146. **(**The Sacred Heart Review, Volume 9, Number 4, 17 December 1892)