

To the Religious of the Montfortian Congregations



A classical text of Marian Spirituality

1. One hundred and sixty years ago a work was published which was destined to become a classic of Marian spirituality. Saint Louis Marie Grignon de Montfort had written *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin* at the beginning of the eighteenth century, but the manuscript had remained practically unknown for more than a century. When at length, almost by chance, it was discovered in 1842 and then published in 1843, it had an immediate success, proving to be a work of extraordinary efficaciousness in spreading “true devotion” to the Blessed Virgin. As far as I am concerned, the reading of this book was a great help to me in my youth: “I found the answer to my doubts,” which were due to a fear that worship given to Mary “if developed too much, might end by compromising the primacy of the worship of Christ” (*My Vocation, Gift and Mystery*, pg. 42). Under the wise guidance of St. Louis Marie de Montfort, I understood that, if we live the mystery of Mary in Christ, there is no such risk. This saint’s Mariological thought, in fact, “is rooted in the Mystery of the Trinity and in the truth of the Incarnation of the Word of God” (*ibid.*).

The Church from the outset, and especially in the most difficult times, has contemplated with particular intensity one of the events of the Passion of Jesus Christ, recalled by St. John: “Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary of Magdala. Seeing his mother and the disciple he loved standing near her, Jesus said to his mother, ‘Woman, this is your son.’ Then to the disciple he said, ‘This is your mother.’ And from that moment the disciple made a place for her in his home” (Jn 19.25-27).

Throughout its history, the People of God has had experience of this gift made by Jesus on the Cross: the gift of his Mother. The Blessed Virgin Mary is truly our Mother, who accompanies us on our pilgrimage of faith, hope and charity, towards an ever more intense union with Christ, the unique Saviour and Mediator of salvation (cf. Const. *Lumen Gentium*, 60 and 62).

As is well-known, in my episcopal arms, which are a symbolic illustration of the gospel text we have just quoted, the motto *Totus tuus* takes its inspiration from the teaching of St. Louis Marie Grignon de Montfort (cf. *My Vocation, Gift and Mystery*, pg 42; *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*, 15). These two words express total belonging to Jesus through Mary: “*Tuus totus ego sum, et omnia mea tua sunt*,” writes St. Louis Marie, and he translates: “I am all yours and all I have is yours, O dear Jesus, through Mary, your holy Mother” (*True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*, 233). The teaching of this saint has had a profound influence on the Marian devotion of many of the faithful, and on my own life. What we are dealing with is a *lived teaching*, of remarkable ascetical and mystical depth, expressed in a lively and ardent style, which often appeals to images and symbols. Since the days of St. Louis Marie, Marian theology has nevertheless developed a great deal, thanks above all to the decisive approach taken by the second Vatican Council. Montfort’s teaching, therefore, must be re-read and interpreted today in the light of the Council, while retaining substantially the same value.

In this letter, I would like to share with you, Religious of the Montfortian Congregations, a meditation on some passages from the writings of St. Louis Marie, so that they may help us in these difficult times to nourish our confidence in the maternal mediation of the Mother of the Lord.

Ad Jesum per Mariam

2. St. Louis Marie recommends with particular force the loving contemplation of the mystery of the Incarnation. True devotion to Mary is Christocentric. In fact, as the Second Vatican Council reminded us, “Devoutly meditating on her (Mary) and contemplating her in the light of the Word made man, the Church reverently penetrates more deeply into the great mystery of the Incarnation” (Const. *Lumen Gentium*, 65).

Love for God, through union with Jesus Christ, is the aim of all authentic devotion, because – as St. Louis Marie writes – Christ “is the only teacher from whom we must learn; the only Lord on whom we should depend; the only Head to whom we should be united and the only model that we should imitate. He is the only Physician that can heal us; the only Shepherd that can feed us; the only Way that can lead us; the only Truth that we can believe; the only Life that can animate us. He alone is everything to us and he alone can satisfy all our desires” (*True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*, 61).

3. Devotion to the Blessed Virgin is a privileged means “of reaching Jesus perfectly, loving him tenderly, and serving him faithfully” (*True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*, 62). This fundamental desire to “love tenderly” issues forth immediately in an ardent prayer to Jesus, begging the grace to share in the ineffable communion of love which exists between Him and his Mother. The total relativity of Mary to Christ, and in Him to the Holy Trinity, is first seen in this observation: “Lastly, you never think of Mary without Mary thinking of God for you. You never praise or honour Mary without Mary joining you in praising and honouring God. Mary is entirely relative to God. Indeed I would say that *she was relative only to God*, because she exists uniquely in reference to him. She is *an echo of God*, speaking and repeating only God. If you say ‘Mary’ she says ‘God’. When St. Elizabeth praised Mary calling her blessed because she had believed, Mary, the faithful echo of God, responded with her canticle, ‘*My soul glorifies the Lord.*’ What Mary did on that day, she does every day. When we praise her, when we love and honour her, when we present anything to her, then God is praised, honoured and loved and receives our gift through Mary and in Mary” (*True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*, 225).

Again it is in his prayer to the Mother of the Saviour that St. Louis Marie expresses the Trinitarian dimension of her relationship with God: “Hail, Mary, most beloved daughter of the eternal Father; hail, Mary, most admirable mother of the Son; hail, Mary, most faithful spouse of the Holy Spirit!” (*Secret of Mary*, 68). This traditional expression, already employed by St. Francis of Assisi (cf. *Fonti Francescane*, 281), even if it contains various levels of analogy, is certainly a powerful way of expressing in some sense the particular sharing by the Virgin Mary in the life of the Most Holy Trinity.

4. St. Louis Marie contemplates all the mysteries from the starting point of the *Incarnation*, which comes about at the moment of the Annunciation. So, in *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*, Mary appears as “the true earthly paradise of the new Adam”, the “virgin and immaculate soil” from which he was formed (no. 261). She is also the *new Eve*, associated with the *new Adam* in that obedience which repairs the original disobedience of man and woman (cf. *ibid.*, 53; St. Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*, III, 21, 10-22, 4). It is through this obedience that the Son of God enters into the world. The Cross itself is already mysteriously present in the moment of the Incarnation, at that instant of the conception of Jesus in the womb of Mary. In fact, the ‘*behold I come*’ of the *Letter to the Hebrews* (cf. 10.5-9) is the first act of obedience of the Son towards the Father, and is already an acceptance of his redemptive Sacrifice “on coming into the world”.

“As all perfection,” writes St. Louis Marie Grignion de Montfort, “consists in our being conformed, united and consecrated to Jesus it naturally follows that the most perfect of all devotions is that which conforms, unites, and consecrates us most completely to Jesus. Now of all God’s creatures Mary is the most conformed to Jesus. It therefore follows that, of all devotions, devotion to her makes for the most effective

consecration and conformity to him. The more one is consecrated to Mary, the more one is consecrated to Jesus” (*True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*, 120). Speaking to Jesus, St. Louis Marie marvels at the union between the Son and the Mother: “She is so completely transformed into you by grace that she no longer lives, she no longer exists, because you alone, dear Jesus, live and reign in her... If we only knew the glory and the love given to you by this wonderful creature... So intimately is she united to you... she loves you ardently, and glorifies you more perfectly than all your other creatures put together” (*ibid.*, 63).

Mary, eminent member of the Mystical Body, and Mother of the Church

5. According to the words of the Second Vatican Council, Mary “is hailed as preeminent and as a wholly unique member of the Church, and as its type and outstanding model in faith and charity” (Const. *Lumen Gentium*, 53). The Mother of the Redeemer is also herself redeemed by Him, in a unique manner in her immaculate conception, and she has gone before us in this faith-filled and loving listening to the Word of God which brings blessedness (cf. *ibid.*, 58). For this reason also, Mary “is... intimately united to the Church. As St. Ambrose taught, the Mother of God is a type of the Church in the order of faith, charity and perfect union with Christ. For in the mystery of the Church, which is itself rightly called mother and virgin, the Blessed Virgin stands out in eminent and singular fashion as exemplar both of virgin and mother” (*ibid.*, 63). The same Council contemplates Mary as *Mother of the members of Christ* (cf. *ibid.*, 53; 62) and so it was that Paul VI proclaimed her *Mother of the Church*. The doctrine of the Mystical Body, which expresses in the strongest way the union of Christ with the Church, is also the biblical foundation for this claim: “the head and the members are born of the same mother” (*True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*, 32), as St. Louis Marie reminds us. In this sense we can say that, through the action of the Holy Spirit, the members are united and conformed to the Head who is Christ, the Son of the Father and of Mary, in such a way that “a true child of the Church must have God for his Father and Mary for his mother” (*Secret of Mary*, 11).

In Christ, the only Son, we are truly children of the Father and, at the same time, children of Mary and of the Church. In the virginal birth of Jesus, it is, in some sense, the whole of humanity which is re-born. To the Mother of the Saviour, “We can attribute more truly... what Saint Paul said of himself, ‘I am in labour again with all the children of God until Jesus Christ, my Son, is formed in them to the fullness of his age’ (cf. *Gal 4.19*)” (*True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*, 33). This teaching is most beautifully expressed in this prayer: “*Holy Spirit, give me a great love and longing for Mary, your exalted spouse. Give me a great trust in her maternal heart and a continuous access to her compassion, so that with her you may truly form Jesus, great and powerful, in me*” (*Secret of Mary*, 67).

One of the finest expressions of the spirituality of St. Louis Marie Grignion de Montfort refers to the identification of the faithful with Mary in her love for Jesus, and in the service she offers Him. Meditating on the well-known text of St. Ambrose: *May the soul of Mary be in each one to glorify the Lord; may the spirit of Mary be in each of us to rejoice in God* (*Expos. in Luc.*, 12, 26 : PL 15, 1561), he writes: “Happy is the man who... will be completely possessed and governed by the spirit of Mary, a spirit which is gentle yet strong, zealous yet prudent, humble yet courageous, pure yet fruitful” (*True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*, 258). This mystical identification with Mary is wholly directed towards Jesus, as is shown in this prayer: “Finally, most dearly beloved Mother, grant, if it be possible, that I may have no other spirit but yours to know Jesus and his divine will. May I have no soul but yours to praise and glorify the Lord. May I have no heart but yours to love God purely and ardently as you love him” (*Secret of Mary*, 68).

Holiness, the perfection of Charity

6. The Constitution *Lumen Gentium* also has this to say: “While in the most Blessed Virgin the Church has already reached that perfection whereby she exists without spot or wrinkle (cf. Eph 5.27), the faithful still

strive to conquer sin and increase in holiness. And so they turn their eyes to Mary who shines forth to the whole community of the elect as the model of virtues” (no. 65). Holiness is the *perfection of charity*, of that love for God and one’s neighbour which is the object of the greatest commandment of Jesus (cf. Mt 22.38) and also the greatest gift of the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 13.13). So, in his Hymns, St. Louis Marie presents successively to the faithful the excellence of charity (Hymn 5), the lights of faith (Hymn 6) and the firmness of hope (Hymn 7).

In Montfortian spirituality, the dynamism of charity is expressed particularly through the symbol of *the slavery of love for Jesus*, after the example and with the maternal help of Mary. It is a matter of a total communion in the *kenosis* of Christ: a communion lived out with Mary, who is intimately present in the mysteries of the life of her Son. “No other human state involves belonging more completely to another than slavery. Among Christian peoples, nothing makes a person belong more completely to Jesus and his holy Mother than voluntary slavery. Our Lord himself gave us the example of this when out of love for us he *‘took the form of a slave’*. Our Lady gave us the same example when she called herself the handmaid or slave of the Lord. The Apostle considered it an honour to be called *‘slave of Christ’*. Several times in Holy Scripture, Christians are referred to as *‘slaves of Christ’*” (*True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*, 72). In fact, the Son of God, come into the world through obedience to his Father in the Incarnation (cf. Heb 10.7), then makes himself humbler yet in accepting to be obedient unto death, death on a cross (cf. Phil 2.7-8). Mary responded to the will of God by the total gift of herself, body and soul, for ever, from the Annunciation up to the Cross, and from the Cross up to her Assumption. Between the obedience of Christ and that of Mary, there is, to be sure, an asymmetry engendered by the *ontological difference* which exists between the divine Person of the Son and the human person of Mary, from which flows the exclusive nature and the salvific efficaciousness of the obedience of Christ. It was from this primary obedience of Christ that his Mother herself received the grace to be able to obey God in a total way and thus to collaborate in the mission of her Son.

The *slavery of love*, therefore, must be understood in the light of the marvellous exchange between God and humanity in the mystery of the Incarnate Word. This is a true exchange of love between God and his creature in the reciprocity of the total gift of oneself. The “spirit (of this devotion)... requires an interior dependence on Mary, and effectively becoming her slave and the slave of Jesus through her” (*Secret of Mary*, 44). Paradoxically, this “bond of charity”, this “slavery of love”, makes a person fully free, with the true liberty of the children of God (cf. *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*, 169). It is a matter of dedicating oneself totally to Jesus, in response to the Love with which he first loved us. The one who lives out such a love can say with St. Paul: “I live now not with my own life but with the life of Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2.20).

The ‘pilgrimage of faith’

7. I wrote in *Novo millennio ineunte*: “One can never really reach Jesus except by the path of faith” (no. 19). It was precisely this path that Mary followed throughout her earthly life, and it is the path of the Church on pilgrimage until the end of time. The Second Vatican Council laid great emphasis on the faith of Mary, shared in a mysterious way by the Church, shining the spotlight on the journey of Mary from the moment of the Annunciation up to the moment of the redemptive Passion (cf. Const. *Lumen Gentium*, 57 and 67; Encyclical *Redemptoris Mater*, 25-27).

In the writings of St. Louis Marie, we find the same stress on the faith lived out by the Mother of Jesus on a path which leads from the Incarnation to the Cross, a faith in which Mary is the model and figure of the Church. St. Louis Marie expresses this with a great wealth of nuances when he presents to his readers the “marvellous effects” of the perfect devotion to Mary: “Therefore the more you gain the friendship of this noble Queen and faithful Virgin the more you will be inspired by faith in your daily life. It will cause you to

depend less upon sensible and extraordinary feelings. For it is a lively faith animated by love enabling you to do everything from no other motive than that of pure love. It is a firm faith, unshakable as a rock, prompting you to remain firm and steadfast in the midst of storms and tempests. It is an active and probing faith which like some mysterious pass-key admits you into the mysteries of Jesus Christ and of man's final destiny and into the very heart of God himself. It is a courageous faith which inspires you to undertake and carry out without hesitation great things for God and the salvation of souls. Lastly, this faith will be your flaming torch, your very life with God, your secret fund of divine Wisdom, and an all-powerful weapon for you to enlighten those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death. It inflames those who are lukewarm and need the gold of fervent love. It restores life to those who are dead through sin. It moves and transforms hearts of marble and cedars of Lebanon by gentle and convincing argument. Finally, this faith will strengthen you to resist the devil and the other enemies of salvation" (*True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*, 214).

Like St. John of the Cross, St. Louis Marie insists above all on the purity of faith and on its essential (and often painful) darkness (cf. *Secret of Mary*, 51-52). It is a contemplative faith which, renouncing sensible and extraordinary things, penetrates the mysterious depths of Christ. So, in his prayer, St. Louis Marie addresses the Mother of the Lord, saying: "I do not ask for visions or revelations, for sensible devotion or even spiritual pleasures... As for my portion here on earth, I wish only to have a share in yours, that is, to have simple faith without seeing or tasting" (*ibid.*, 69). The Cross is the culminating point of Mary's faith, as I wrote in the Encyclical *Redemptoris Mater*: "Through this faith Mary is perfectly united with Christ in his self-emptying... This is perhaps the deepest *kenosis* of faith in human history" (no. 18).

Sign of Sure Hope

8. The Holy Spirit invites Mary to "reproduce herself" in his elect, putting down in them the roots of her "invincible faith", but also of her "firm hope" (cf. *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*, 34). The Second Vatican Council recalled this: "The Mother of Jesus in the glory which she possesses in body and soul in heaven is the image and beginning of the Church as it is to be perfected in the world to come. Likewise she shines forth on earth, until the day of the Lord shall come, a sign of certain hope and comfort to the pilgrim People of God" (Const. *Lumen Gentium*, 68). St. Louis Marie evokes this eschatological dimension particularly when he speaks of the "saints of the latter times", formed by the Blessed Virgin to bring about in the Church the victory of Christ over the forces of evil (cf. *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*, 49-59). There is no question here of any form of "millenarism", but rather of a profound sense of the eschatological character of the Church, linked with the uniqueness and salvific universality of Jesus Christ. The Church awaits the glorious coming of Jesus at the end of time. Like Mary, and with Mary, the saints are in the Church and for the Church, to make her holiness shine out, to extend to the ends of the earth and to the end of time the work of Christ, our unique Saviour.

In the antiphon *Salve Regina* the Church calls the Mother of God "our Hope". The same expression is used by St. Louis Marie, commenting on a text from St. John Damascene which applies to Mary the biblical symbol of the anchor (cf. *Hom. I^a Dorm. B.V.M.*, 14 ; PG 96, 719): "'We fasten souls,' he said, 'to Mary, our hope, as to a firm anchor.' It was to Mary that the saints who attained salvation most firmly anchored themselves as did others who wanted to ensure their perseverance in holiness. Blessed, indeed, are those Christians who bind themselves faithfully and completely to her as to a secure anchor!" (*True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*, 175). Through devotion to Mary, Jesus himself "opens our hearts and fills them with holy confidence in God, helping us to regard God as our Father; he inspires us with a generous and filial love" (*ibid.*, 169).

With the Blessed Virgin Mary, with the same mother's heart that was hers, the Church prays, hopes and intercedes for the salvation of all human beings. These are the last lines of the Constitution *Lumen Gentium*: "The entire body of the faithful pours forth urgent supplications to the Mother of God and of men that she, who aided the beginnings of the Church by her prayers, may now, exalted as she is above all the angels and saints, intercede before her Son in the fellowship of all the saints, until all families of people, whether they are honoured with the title of Christian or whether they still do not know the Saviour, may be happily gathered together in peace and harmony into one people of God, for the glory of the Most Holy and Undivided Trinity" (no. 69).

In expressing once again this wish which, along with the other Council Fathers, I expressed nearly forty years ago, I send the whole Montfortian Family a special Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, 8 December 2003, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

John Paul II

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Joannes Paulus II". To the left of the signature is a faint, circular embossed seal, likely the official seal of the Holy See.