

12. TRUE DEVOTION TO MARY IN THE LIFE OF A PRIEST



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During the audience which His Holiness Pope John Paul II gave to an International Retreat of Priests in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome on October 9, 1984, he said: *"The world today needs priests, needs many priests, but above all needs holy priests"*. In this conference we shall consider how best we can become what the Pope desired: viz. holy priests; for, if we go down memory lane, this is exactly what we wanted to be on the day of our sacerdotal ordination, no matter how long ago it was. We shall take the cue from the masterly treatise *True Devotion to Mary* (TD), written by St. Louis-Marie Grignion de Montfort (1673-1716) in the early 1700s.

Permit me to start with a personal testimony. All that I am about to say to you is not an academic exposition of de Montfort's teachings, but a witness to a spirituality which has strongly influenced and supported me all through the almost fifty years of my priestly life. As a recently ordained priest, only 22 years old, I was searching for some means to keep up the priestly ideals and to fan the spiritual fervour that had been inculcated in me during my seminary formation. I providentially came across the little book *True Devotion to Mary* in a bookstore in Bombay. It brought back so many pleasant memories of the years when I was a Junior member of the Legion of Mary, the lay association founded by Frank Duff with the monfortian spirituality. While meditating on this treatise, it dawned on me that de Montfort's thoughts, although meant for Christians in general, could be applied in a special way to priests.

St. Louis-Marie de Montfort reveals a beautiful secret, a shortcut to holiness. And the secret is MARY, the masterpiece of God's creation. De Montfort shows how one can best know, love and serve Our Lord, with Mary as our Mother, Model and Guide. *True Devotion to Mary* is an invaluable treasure, indeed. It has been commended by many popes ever since it was discovered in a coffer in 1842, where it lay hidden for almost 150 years. Pope John Paul II read it often as a young man, and he took his episcopal and papal motto *Totus tuus* from it. It has also been the inspiration of my own episcopal motto: *Servus*.

The treatise starts with a prophetic declaration: *"It was through the Blessed Virgin Mary that Jesus came into the world, and it is also through her that he must reign in the world."* (TD 1). No priest, who is engaged in furthering the

advent of the Kingdom of Christ on earth, can be indifferent to this bold affirmation of a man of God.

St. Grignion de Montfort presents a vivid image of the Blessed Virgin Mary which is very relevant to her relationship with priests. He calls her the *forma Dei*, the *mould of God*. We all know what a mould is. It consists of two pieces of wood held together, with an image carved on the inside, with a hole through which molten wax or metal is poured. When the mould is opened, the article formed within bears the inner features of the mould. Now, Mary – says St. Louis-Marie – is the mould where Jesus, the Son of God and the Eternal High Priest, was formed. So, whoever is formed in this mould, at Mary's school, will bear the features of her Son (*cf TD 31-36*). It is therefore but natural that Mary should be the mould for every priest, who by definition is an *Alter Christus*. And what could be the best way to get into that mould? It is by cultivating Mary's sentiments and doing everything *through* her, *with* her, *in* her and *for* her (*TD 257-265*). As St. Ambrose recommends: "May the soul of Mary be in each one of us to glorify the Lord! May the spirit of Mary be in each one of us to rejoice in God!" (*TD 217*). So, the more our priesthood has a Marian flavour, the more pleasing it will be to the Most Holy Trinity, and consequently also be more fruitful, for Mary is the most cherished Daughter of God the Father, the Mother of God the Son and the Spouse of God the Holy Spirit.

Triple thrust of a priestly vocation

Our priestly vocation has three main thrusts: a call to *sanctity*, a call to *service*, and a call to *spiritual combat*. These are the hallmarks of our priestly life. St. Louis-Marie teaches us how Mary can play an essential role in each of them.

Sanctity

Sanctity consists in loving God above everything with all one's heart, and soul and mind (*cf Mt 22:37*). To achieve this, de Montfort invites us to *consecrate ourselves totally to Jesus through Mary as slaves of love*.

One might be surprised that we speak of *slavery* in the 21st century. But, we speak here, not of a slavery which degrades and disgraces the human person, but of a slavery of love which ennobles and enhances human dignity (*TD 70*). It is a *servitude* by which we place ourselves totally and unreservedly at the service of the Divine Master, and surrender to Him all the faculties of our body and soul, our thoughts, words and actions, our good works past, present and future, the merits we have gained and the virtues we possess: in short, all that we have or will have in the order of nature, grace and glory (*TD 121*). We thus remain attached to God alone, and fully detached from all persons, places or things. Jesus becomes our "Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end" (*Rev 22:13*). I am sure you have seen Demetrius, the slave, in the film *Quo Vadis* on the life of the early Christians in Rome. He is honoured to be at his master's service, he receives no recompense for his labours, he exposes his life to defend the master's household and is ready to die for his master. Such must be the noble sentiments of a priest towards Jesus, his Lord and Master, who deigns not to call him a *servant*, but His *friend*.

The Blessed Virgin Mary sets an example for us to follow. She gave herself fully to God as His *handmaid* (servant-slave) without keeping anything for herself. Her whole being was solely directed to God. De Montfort emphasises this with many metaphors. He says, Mary is the *pathway* to Jesus, leading souls quickly and securely to Him. She is a *magnet* which attracts the Holy Spirit. She is the *compass* which always points to Christ, her Son. She is the *echo of God*: if you say "Mary", she replies "God": as when Elisabeth praised her and called her blessed because she had believed God's message, Mary responded saying: "My soul glorifies the Lord... Holy be His Name". (TD 225).

In this way the Blessed Virgin Mary teaches us priests to beware of putting ourselves on a pedestal and of taking for ourselves the glory due solely to God. Our successes, and the titles conferred on us and the honours we receive make us especially vulnerable in this respect. So much so that, at times, we can forget that we are mere servants, and unworthy servants at that (*Lk 17:7-10*), even though, in His goodness Jesus has deigned to call us His friends (*Jn 15:15*), and has anointed us and empowered us to act in His name, *in persona Christi Capitis*, for things that pertain to God (*cf Hb 5:1*).

A priest must therefore constantly remind himself that his sacerdotal vocation is a free gift of God, given not because of his personal merits, talents or achievements, nor for his personal aggrandisement, but for his sanctification, and in order to build up the People of God. All through his priestly life, Jesus' words must, so to speak, haunt him: "You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and have sent you to bear fruit that will last" (*Jn 15:16*). Take Mary's example: even though she is the Mother of God and the Queen of heaven and earth, she always considers herself to be the humble maid of Nazareth.

Service

The second thrust of our priestly vocation is *humble and loving service*. In de Montfort's school of spirituality, a priest who consecrates himself as a slave of love can never consider as his personal property anything that he possesses - his position and talents, his monies and friendships, his material goods, the persons entrusted to his pastoral care - but only as given to him to be administered unto as a *steward*. This echoes the mind of St. Paul: "This is how one should regard us: as *servants of Christ* and *stewards of the mysteries of God*" (*1 Cor 4:1*). Stewardship is the form of discipleship where the good of others takes precedence over one's own personal interests or preferences.

Even at Mary's school, *servitude to Jesus* means *service before self*. In fact, as soon as the Archangel Gabriel left her after the Annunciation, Mary did not sit back complacently, revelling in her newly invested dignity of Mother of God, but she went with haste to help her cousin Elizabeth who was with child in her advanced age. So also, at the marriage at Cana in Galilee, while others were enjoying the festive meal, Mary saw the empty wine jars and she 'provoked' Jesus' first miracle. For Mary, therefore, to be a handmaid of the Lord meant to go out and meet the needs of others, and she continues to do this even today from her throne in heaven. She teaches us not to be weighed down with our titles and

achievements, or to be puffed up with what we think of ourselves or with what others say about us, but rather to put our time and talents joyfully at the service of God and neighbour.

Priestly stewardship is a 24-hour service to be exercised in different ways: by dispensing God's Mysteries to His Holy People in the Sacraments, by caring for the poor and the marginalised wherever Jesus said they would be found: the hungry, thirsty, naked, in prison, strangers; by shepherding the parish flock, the associations and ecclesial communities, etc. Our priestly service would also necessarily include those who have left the Church, or who are indifferent to God or victims of broken marriages, etc. In short: we must be Good Shepherds and Good Samaritans to all those entrusted to our pastoral care. We cannot, and should not, be satisfied with giving God the minimum of our service, because the God who has called and sent us to work in His vineyard because of no merits of our own, deserves the best of our time and talents.

We have Jesus' own words and example with regard to servitude. He is known as the Servant of Yahweh, and "though He was in the form of God, He did not reckon it as a treasure to be jealously grasped on to, but He emptied Himself and became man, taking the form of a slave..." (cf *Phil 2:6-11*). When the apostles were discussing among themselves as to who among them was the greatest, Jesus tells them that the greatest among them has to be their servant, "just like the Son of Man who came, not to be served, but to serve and to give His life for the brethren" (*Mt 20:28*).

There are some very meaningful images of humble and loving servitude in the life of Christ, which could be a source of inspiration to us priests:

- ***Good Shepherd***: Like Jesus, a priest must give his life for his sheep, and have concern for the lost sheep and for those who are outside the fold. He should know his own and they must recognise his voice. He must not be like mercenaries who do not have the good of the sheep at heart, but only their own personal gains, and therefore limit their hours of service to the minimum and demand a salary which has been well calculated in the minutest detail.

- ***Good Samaritan***: A priest should step out to help others, guided by their needs, and not by his personal, social or political sympathy or antipathy.

- ***Jesus on a donkey's back***: Jesus puts on no triumphant attire, but rides into Jerusalem on a donkey's back (*Mt 21:1-11*). A priest should consider himself like that donkey, and be proud to carry Jesus high in his life, so that others can follow Jesus towards the heavenly Jerusalem. The praises strewn around him and the hosannas shouted towards him are not meant for the priest, but for the Lord Jesus, whom he is carrying high on His way to Jerusalem.

- ***Jesus washes the feet of His apostles***: A priest will always remember the Master's words at the Last Supper: "You call Me Lord and Master, and you do well, for so am I. If then I, your Lord and Master have washed your feet, you too must wash each other's feet" (*Jn 13:12-14*).

In this vision of service, Jesus' many *Servant parables* come alive and become very meaningful and demanding for us priests, for we see what the Lord expects of us, His servant-friends:

- As the faithful and wise servant, we must give those entrusted to our care their portion of food at the proper time, remembering that the Master will require more from him to whom He has given more (*Mt 24:45-51; Lk 12:42-46*).
- Like the servant returning after a hard day's work, we must acknowledge that we are unworthy servants, and have only done our duty (*Lk 17:7-10*).
- The servant who was forgiven his debt, but was unforgiving to his fellow servant (*Mt 18:23-35*) reminds us that we are agents of God's mercy, and must give freely to others what we ourselves have received in abundance from God.
- Like the watchful servants (*Mk 13:33-37; Lk 12:35-40*) we must wait patiently for the Master's coming at the end of our lives, and in the meanwhile use the talents He has given us to produce as much spiritual fruit as possible.
- The workers called at different hours to work in the Lord's vineyard (*Mt 20:1-16*) will remind us that it is never too late to start. We must not compare and contrast God's way of dealing with us or with others, nor be jealous because He is good.
- The Master will be severe with those servants who abuse their power, lord it over or ill-treat their fellow servants (*Mt 24:45-51*).

Servants of Jesus Christ are co-workers in the Lord's vineyard, working not only *for* Him, but also *with* Him. A servant-slave always has his eyes fixed on his Master in order to do his will (*Ps 123:2*).

Spiritual Combat

It is no secret that on our Ordination day, while our relatives and friends congratulated us and wished us well, there was someone lying in the lurch enviously disturbed and maliciously determined to ruin our priesthood by dampening our initial fervour, or degrading it to a superficial mediocrity, or planning to bring it to a state of disillusionment, and even failure. Knowing how fragile His ministers are and how they would be the devil's special targets, Jesus prayed for his newly ordained priests at the Last Supper: "Father, I pray that you keep them from the Evil One" (*Jn 17:15*).

Since the day of our Ordination, especially when we have sat in the confessional, we have been aware of the fierce battle raging in and around us with the Evil One, a battle which began in the Garden of Eden at the beginning of human history. Already then, God willed that Mary should enter into the picture and remain there till the end of time. Besides the Gospels, she features both in the first and last books of the Holy Bible. In *Genesis*, while God severely rebuked Satan for having led our first parents, Adam and Eve, to commit the original sin, He planned to send his Son as our Redeemer, born of the Virgin Mary, and He mentioned Mary's uncompromising stance against the devil: "I will put enmity between you and the Woman, between your seed and her seed. She will crush your head, and you will lie in wait at her heel" (*Gn 3:15*). In the *Apocalypse*, Mary is portrayed as the Woman, clothed with the sun, who is fiercely, but unsuccessfully, assaulted by Satan (*Rev 12:1-6*).

The over 2000-year-old history of the Church shows that the battle between the forces of good and evil has raged

with various intensity in the Church at large and in individuals. The saints, in particular, have felt the impact more fully, thus confirming what St. Paul wrote to Timothy, that: "those who want to live piously in the Lord will suffer persecution" (2 *Tm* 3:12) and, in our case, persecution from the devil. Take, for example, St. Patrick, who overcame so many difficulties and bore many sufferings in order to plant the Gospel in this country, and you are his heirs. And Jean-Marie Vianney, the saintly Curé of Ars, who led hundreds of thousands of persons to God through his ministry at the confessional and in the pulpit, but was tormented in different ways by Satan, especially when he wanted to rest for just a few hours at night. It is no wonder then that many a priest prefers to live a mediocre life in order not to be harassed by Lucifer and his wicked demons.

De Montfort felt this battle very keenly and had much to suffer from the wiles of the Evil One. All throughout his life he did not win the favour of his own bishop and was opposed by his fellow priests. He predicted that his treatise, *True Devotion to Mary*, would be torn to bits with diabolical teeth or left discarded in the silence of a coffer (*TD* 114), and so it was for some 150 years. Why? Because the spirituality of loving servitude of Jesus through Mary which he advocated was diametrically opposed to the schemes which Satan uses to lure people into his trap with baits of *prosperity, popularity and power*. The devil used these to tempt Jesus at the end of His forty-day fast in the desert: "change stones into bread" (reflecting the comfort-without-toil mindset or the prosperity gospel in vogue among some Christian sects); "throw yourself down from the pinnacle, and people will believe in you" (advocating a cheap popularity provoked by spurious healings and avoiding the hard way of the Cross); "I will give you the kingdoms of the world if you will bow down and adore me" (inculcating a greed for power and position at any cost, which forgets Christian identity and values and is even ready to 'sell one's soul'). The antidote to these temptations of the devil is precisely what de Montfort proposes in the consecration of loving servitude of Jesus through Mary, i.e. a poverty of spirit, which involves a total detachment from all that distracts from God and, above all, humility which touches, so to speak, the tendermost chords of the heart of God.

The war between God and Satan, I repeat, is on since the beginning of human history and is getting fiercer every day, today more than ever before. Already in 1823, the German mystic Blessed Anne Katherine Emmerich – who was privileged to see the life of Christ in a series of visions – described Jesus' descent to the underworld after His death on the Cross. She saw Jesus consoling those who were in limbo and purgatory, and then descending into hell. Here He met first with Judas, who had betrayed Him, and received the humiliated submission of all the devils. She then saw Lucifer, the chief of demons, who had been hurled into hell in chains, and she utters this frightening prophecy: "Fifty or sixty years before the year 2000, God will unleash Satan for a little while" (*The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, ch.59). These are precisely these years we have been living in. Satan is going around today unfettered, and is doing untold harm both in the Church and outside it. His victories are clamorous, but superficial, because he is fighting a losing battle.

For since 1830, a few years after the revelations of Blessed Anne Katherine Emmerich, the Blessed Virgin Mary has

entered openly into the fray of the battle between good and evil when she appeared to St. Catherine Labouré, a novice of the Sisters of Charity at Rue de Bac in Paris, and made her coin a medal with her effigy on it: Mary stands on the world globe, with her feet crushing the head of the Serpent (the devil) - as was announced in Genesis - and with her arms wide open giving out bright rays of light, to mean the many graces that she is showering all over the world. Around her image is the inscription: *O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to you.* [N.B. This was in 1830, twenty-four years before the solemn proclamation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception by Pope Pius IX in 1854. Four years later the Blessed Virgin herself would give her name as the Immaculate Conception during her apparition to Bernadette at Lourdes (1858).] Thanks to the many graces received through this medal, it has been commonly known as The Miraculous Medal.

This medal has a special place in the *Legion of Mary*. It features prominently in the standard (*vexillum*) of the Legion. Around it every day the Legionaries all over the world recite the *Catena Legionis*, viz. Our Lady's *Magnificat* with this antiphon: "*Who is she that comes forth as the morning rising, fair as the moon, bright as the sun, terrible as an army set in battle array?*" It is the battle cry of the Legionaries, with Mary at their head, against Satan and his wiles. And they are not alone.

It is encouraging to see how all over the world there are Marian shrines (some of which are awaiting the authoritative decision of the Church), which are frequented by millions of devotees, both Christian and of other faiths: from Knock here in Ireland to Kibeho in Rwanda; from Walsingham and Aylesford in England to Lavang in Vietnam; from Akita in Japan to Medjugorje in Bosnia-Herzegovina; from La Salette, Paris (Rue de Bac) and Lourdes in France to Vellankanni in India; from Saragozza and Garabandal in Spain to Guadalupe in Mexico; from Fatima in Portugal to Naju in Korea; from Cuapa in Nicaragua to Altötting in Germany; from San Nicholas in Argentina and Czestechowa in Poland to Aparecida in Brazil; from Amsterdam in Holland to Zeitoun in Egypt; from Beauraing and Banneux in Belgium to Betania in Venezuela; and - in Italy - from Pompei, Siracusa and Civitavecchia to St. Mary Major, Sant'Andrea delle Fratte and Tre Fontane in Rome. Mary is indeed gathering together her Legion (and you are a part of it), and is setting up a worldwide network for a frontal and final attack on Lucifer and his demons. De Montfort, in fact, prophetically foresaw "a great squadron of brave and valiant soldiers of Jesus and Mary, men and women, who will combat the world, the devil and corrupted nature, in those more-than-ever perilous times which are about to come" (*TD 114*). They will indeed hasten the day when Mary's words at Fatima will come true: "In the end, my Immaculate Heart will triumph".

Satan, we know, fears three unbeatable enemies: the Holy Spirit, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and St. Michael the Archangel. The devil knows that he cannot fight against the Holy Spirit, who is God, while he is a mere creature, reduced to a miserable state because of his rebellion against God. He has a terrible inferiority complex before St. Michael the Archangel, who is an angel like himself, but whom God has made prince of the heavenly hosts. But Lucifer's greatest humiliation is to be crushed by the Blessed Virgin Mary, a purely human being belonging to a category lower than that of the angels; and she crushes him, not only because she is the Mother of God, but with her humility, which is the

hammer with which she strikes Lucifer's chronic pride and will defeat him. (TD 52).

Let us therefore beware of Satan's tentacles around us and pray often with the words which Jesus Himself taught us in the *Our Father*: "Deliver us from the Evil One".

Conclusion

We are living in very challenging times. Our sublime call to the Sacred Priesthood demands that we be men of God and men for others. This would demand that we be Spirit-filled and Spirit-led, persons deeply engaged in the quest for sanctity, fully involved in the service of our brethren, and leaders in the spiritual combat against the forces of evil around us.

In *True Devotion to Mary* we have a secret that can help us priests to carry out the thrusts of our sacerdotal vocation efficiently and in a manner pleasing to the eyes of God. The secret is MARY, through whom St. Louis-Marie advocates that we consecrate ourselves as loving slaves of Jesus. Thanks be to God, there are hundreds of thousands of persons all over the world who are making this consecration and are finding therein deep fulfilment in their Christian call to holiness.

Mary is indeed the Mother of Hope, as we pray in the *Salve Regina*. No matter how badly bruised or psychologically shaken our priesthood may have been, Mary can rekindle the initial flame of the "gift of God" which was given to us by the imposition of the bishop's hands (2 *Tm* 1;6), and make us happy and holy priests. How consoling will it not be when at the sunset of our lives, having lived our calling at Mary's school of loving servitude of Jesus, we shall receive the Master's welcome: "Well done, good and faithful *servant*, receive the reward that has been prepared for you, enter into the joy of the Lord" (*Mt* 25:21).

I began this meditation by quoting Pope John Paul II's appeal for holy priests at the International Priests' Retreat in Rome in 1984. I end by making my own the Pontiff's concluding prayer on that same occasion: "May the Most Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of Christ the Eternal High Priest, accompany and sustain you. May she teach you, as a Mother to her beloved children, to say always *Fiat* to the will of Christ, her Son, who has chosen you to be His ministers. May she inspire you to often sing the *Magnificat* for the marvels which God is working in your priestly lives and through your pastoral ministry. May she lead you to imitate her *Stabat* at the foot of the Cross, when difficulties, misunderstandings and sufferings arise on your way to perfect holiness. In this way, with Mary and like her, you will taste the joy of the resurrection of Christ and witness to the whole world that *Jesus is Lord!*"