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# The Spiritual Maternity and Saint Louis M. de Montfort

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## THE SPIRITUAL MATERNITY AND ST. LOUIS M. DE MONTFORT

If it is detrimental for the theologian to neglect the practical conclusions of his dogmatic theses, it is doubly so for the spiritual writer to build his devotion on anything but doctrine. While St. Louis Mary de Montfort did not intend, any more than did the other masters of the Berullian school, to write a formal treatise of theology, nevertheless he did not fail to ground his spirituality on the soundest theological truths.

The logical extreme of his conclusions, a lack of full appreciation by many of both Mary's real place in the Divine Plan and Montfort's actual teaching and, unfortunately, some instances of unenlightened zeal have all contributed toward de-emphasizing the solid theological foundation of his position and associating his name in the minds of some with romantic exaggeration. By way of introduction, then, it will perhaps be permissible to indulge in a few pertinent appreciations by theologians.

Pius XII speaks of his "solid and profound theology";<sup>1</sup> Benedict XV says his book on *True Devotion to Mary* is "maximi ponderis";<sup>2</sup> "Pius X has made his own [de Montfort's] teaching . . . and sometimes his very expressions in the encyclical *Ad diem illum*."<sup>3</sup>

The decrees of canonization compare him to St. Bernard for the "salutary and learned way he speaks of Mary";<sup>4</sup> and

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *L'Osservatore Romano*, July 23, 1947, p. 1, col. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Letter to the Superior General of the Montfort Fathers, April 19, 1916. Cf. *Il ritrovamento del Trattato della vera devozione*, Roma, 1924, p. 20.

<sup>3</sup> R. Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., *The Mother of the Savior and Our Interior Life*, Dublin, 1948, p. 300. Cf. also G. M. Roschini, O.S.M., *Mariologia*, vol. 1, Romae, 1947, p. 294; E. Mura, *Le Corps Mystique du Christ*, vol. 2, Paris, 1934, p. 132. For a comparison of texts, see the study by L. Locatelli, *Il pensiero mariano del Beato Pio X*, in *Madre e Regina*, June, 1951, p. 145. Cf. *Regina dei Cuori*, vol. 1, 1914, p. 124.

<sup>4</sup> Decree approving miracles for canonization. Cf. *L'Osservatore Romano*, July 20, 1947, p. 1, col. 4.

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say that he is to be rightfully numbered among the doctors and theologians of Mary.<sup>5</sup>

Roschini says that his Mariology is "solidissima"; that the book *True Devotion* "has exercised and will exercise a great influence on the doctrine and cult of Mary"; that "it supposes a most thorough knowledge of Marian theology, especially patristic theology"; that "it has been rightly called 'la metafisica' of the doctrine concerning the Virgin Mary," and that "nowhere have the foundations of Marian devotion been so solidly exposed as in this treatise."<sup>6</sup>

Garrigou-Lagrange speaks of it as a "masterpiece" and of "the universal esteem it enjoys among theologians,"<sup>7</sup> of its "remarkable doctrine that has become classic."<sup>8</sup> Campana calls it a "complete treatise of mariology."<sup>9</sup> Mura, in his celebrated treatise on the mystical body, says that Montfort's doctrine "is rooted in what is most profound and most traditional in Christian dogma."<sup>10</sup> Dillenschneider writes: "his devotion corresponds in every aspect to the plan of the Divine Wisdom . . . he exploits with sure and admirable logic the idea of Mary's mediation in the economy of salvation."<sup>11</sup> Hugon refers to his writings as "very theological and very exact";<sup>12</sup> Roschini,<sup>13</sup> Cardinal Mercier,<sup>14</sup> De Gruyter<sup>15</sup> and others call

<sup>5</sup> *De tuto* decree, May 21, 1945. Cf. *A.A.S.*, vol. 37, 1945, n. 12, p. 329.

<sup>6</sup> *Op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 293-294.

<sup>7</sup> *I cento anni di un Grande Libro*, in *L'Osservatore Romano*, April 22, 1942.

<sup>8</sup> Preface to Mura's *Le Corps Mystique du Christ*.

<sup>9</sup> *Maria nel Culto Cattolico*, vol. 2, Torino-Roma, 1933, p. 267.

<sup>10</sup> *Le Corps Mystique du Christ*, vol. 2, Paris, 1934, p. 136.

<sup>11</sup> *La Mariologie de S. Alphonse de Liguori; son influence sur le renouveau des doctrines mariales et de la piété catholique après la tourmente du Protestantisme et du Jansénisme*, Fribourg (Suisse), 1931, p. 248.

<sup>12</sup> *Marie, pleine de grâce*, Paris, 1926, p. 144.

<sup>13</sup> *Op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 294.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *Documenta circa exoptatam definitionem dogmaticam universalis Mediationis B. V. Mariae . . . ad episcopatum missa; documentum A: "Oratio."*

<sup>15</sup> *De Beata Maria Regina*, Buscoduci, 1934, p. 119.

him simply the "doctor" of the mediation; an entire Mariological convention was dedicated to the study of his teaching (Barcelona, 1918).<sup>16</sup>

It should be unnecessary to point out that Montfort's doctrine is not based on any one fact or apparition or prerogative or mystery of the life of Mary (unless it be the Incarnation), but on her over-all position in the Divine Plan.

This position is universal, as universal as that of Christ with Whom she occupies the central place. Wherever we find Jesus, there also is to be found Mary. Her area of influence will be co-extensive with that of Christ, i.e., the whole realm of the supernatural. She is "the inseparable companion of His life, His death, His glory and His power in heaven and on earth . . . He gave her by grace, relatively to His majesty, all the same rights and privileges which He possesses by nature."<sup>17</sup>

This position of universal association with Christ is necessary. There is a "necessary union" between them, so that Mary cannot be without Him, "else she would cease to be what she is" (*T.D.* 63). The source and extent of this necessity is the Divine Will. God, "always independent and sufficient to Himself, never had, and has not now, any absolute need of the Holy Virgin for the accomplishment of His will; nevertheless . . . things being as they are now, that is, God having willed to commence and complete His greatest works by the most Holy Virgin . . . He will not change His conduct in the eternal ages" (*T.D.* 14, 15). She is necessary "by a necessity which we call hypothetical, in consequence of His will" (*T.D.* 39).

However, this universal, necessary position is "relative." "Mary is altogether relative to God; and indeed I might well

<sup>16</sup> Cf. *Crónica del Primer Congreso Mariano Montfortiano*, Barcelona, 1918, 480 pages.

<sup>17</sup> *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary*, ed. Bay Shore, New York, 1947, No. 74. Further references to this treatise will be indicated simply by the letters *T.D.*

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call her the relation to God. She only exists with reference to God" (*T.D.* 225), and what is said "absolutely of Jesus Christ" applies "relatively (to) Our Lady" (*T.D.* 74). If she forms one principle of salvation and mediation and intercession with Christ, it is with Christ in the principal, all-sufficient role and Mary entirely dependent, secondary or "relative" and "infinitely below her Son" (*T.D.* 27).

This place of Mary with regard to us is conceived by Montfort as principally one of spiritual motherhood. The papers read at the Montfortian sessions of the Mariological Congress at Rome in 1950 unanimously agreed on this.<sup>18</sup> Garrigou-Lagrange concurs when he writes that "una sola idea-madre," that of the spiritual maternity, runs through Montfort's book<sup>19</sup> and Father Bernard, in his classic on the spiritual maternity, *Le Mystère de Marie*, adds: "Of all the great spiritual writers of the last centuries, St. Louis de Montfort is, without contradiction, the one who has contributed the most toward impressing upon us this sentiment of our dependence on the Blessed Virgin and her maternity with regard to us."<sup>20</sup>

His main line of development and proof of the spiritual maternity is in terms of the Mystical Body, the one aspect which perhaps gives the most comprehensive view of Mary's unique position.

By means of it, he derives the spiritual maternity directly from the divine maternity. "If Jesus Christ, the Head of men is born in her, the predestined, who are members of that Head, ought also to be born in her, by a necessary consequence. One and the same mother does not bring forth into the world the head without the members or the members without the head; for this would be a monster of nature.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. *Marianum*, vol. 13, 1951, p. 96.

<sup>19</sup> *I cento anni di un Grande Libro*, in *L'Osservatore Romano*, April 22, 1942, p. 1.

<sup>20</sup> *Le Mystère de Marie*, Paris, 1933, p. 11.

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So, in like manner, in the order of grace, the Head and the members are born of one and the same mother; and if a member of the Mystical Body, that is to say, one of the predestinate, was born of any other mother than Mary, who has produced the Head, he would not be one of the predestinate, nor a member of Jesus Christ, but simply a monster in the order of grace" (*T.D.* 32). Mary, then, is the universal mother, the mother of the whole Christ, of the Head and, by a necessary consequence, of the members. The spiritual maternity is a consequence or corollary or complement of the divine maternity. There is, in a real sense, only one maternity, that of the whole Christ or the divine maternity, embracing in the physical order the generation of Christ and, in the order of grace, the spiritual generation of His members. The singular mission of Mary, then, is to give Christ to the world, physically and mystically.

In the exercise of this mission, the whole Trinity was associated with Mary. "God the Father communicated to Mary His fruitfulness, inasmuch as a mere creature was capable of it, in order that He might give her the power to produce His Son and all the members of His Mystical Body" (*T.D.* 17); "God the Son descended into her virginal womb, as the new Adam into His terrestrial paradise" (*T.D.* 18) and "wishes to form Himself and, so to speak, incarnate Himself in His members every day by His dear Mother" (*T.D.* 31); "God the Holy Ghost, being barren in God, that is to say, not producing another Divine Person, is become fruitful by Mary, whom He has espoused. It is with her, in her and of her that He has produced His masterpiece, which is God made man, and that He goes on producing daily, to the end of the world, the predestinate and the members of the Body of that adorable Head" (*T.D.* 20).

The spiritual maternity will then extend to as many as are members of the Mystical Body, and Mary will be the mother of

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each individual to the same extent that he is incorporated with Christ as one of His brethren, adopted into divine sonship by God and sanctified by the Holy Ghost. Her maternal office becomes a necessity; outside of it, there is no spiritual generation. "He who has not Mary for his mother, has not God for his Father" (*T.D.* 30); "The Son . . . is not daily formed and engendered except by her. . . . The Holy Ghost does not form the members of our Lord's Mystical Body except by her" (*T.D.* 140).

Since supernatural life is grace, her spiritual maternity will be a maternity of grace. This maternity of grace, in the mind of Montfort, resolves itself into two phases.

The first, exercised on earth, consists principally in the acquisition of grace, by merit, through the Incarnation and coredemptive participation in the Passion. This phase is treated only briefly; for it is obvious what place the Incarnation occupies in that order of things that makes Mary the Mother of the Mystical Body. By conceiving Christ, she also conceived His members and she became our mother at the Incarnation. "The same mother does not bring forth the Head without the members." The Incarnation is what counts. "In this mystery (Christ) has wrought all the other mysteries of His life by the acceptance which He made of them; . . . (it) is an abridgment of all the mysteries and contains the will and grace of all" (*T.D.* 248). The same applies relatively to Mary. The Incarnation contains the will of all the mysteries of her life and association with Christ; for the object of her consent was the motherhood of Christ, precisely inasmuch as He was to be the Savior. By supernatural enlightenment she had sufficient knowledge of all the implications of the Incarnation, including the redemptive passion and death, and it was to all this she gave her free and conscious consent. Without this knowledge, the very asking of her consent would have been meaningless. "The Son of God became man for our salva-

tion . . . in Mary and by Mary . . . but only after having asked her consent" (*T.D.* 16). It contains the grace of all. As by the Incarnation the Redemption was sufficient and received its superabundance on Calvary, so also by the Incarnation Mary concurred sufficiently by her consent and co-operation to become in all truth the spiritual mother of mankind.

The second phase is exercised in heaven, by the distribution of grace. Associated with Christ in meriting the life of grace, her role would be incomplete unless she likewise shared in communicating this life, in nourishing it, in bringing it to its full growth and development into glory. Thus God made her "the sole treasurer of His treasures and the sole dispenser of His graces" (*T.D.* 44), so that she gives "to whom she wills, when she wills, as she wills and in such quantity as she wills" (*T.D.* 206). No truth is more clearly and more abundantly set forth in Montfort's writings than this universal mediation of Mary in the distribution of graces. It does not mean necessarily universal invocation,<sup>21</sup> nor that she acts independently. Her action, by way of prayer and intercession, is the faithful expression of the prayer of Christ and consequently always heard. "Mary being altogether transformed into God by grace and by glory . . . asks nothing, wishes nothing, does nothing contrary to the eternal and immutable will of God . . . her prayers and petitions are so powerful with God that they always pass for commandments with His Majesty Who never resists the prayer of His Mother because she is always humble and conformed to His Will" (*T.D.* 27).

It is clear that the concept of mother applied to the function of Mary is an analogous one. There are many elements of dissimilarity and superiority found in the reality not expressed by the term. For there is involved the generation of a totally different and superior life; it extends beyond a one-time generation and is a continual life-giving, taking hold of

<sup>21</sup> Cf. *The Secret of Mary*, no. 23.



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a person's entire supernatural activity, affecting each and every grace received and action performed, throughout life and eternity. For the same reason, the correlative, child, does not say all.

In fact, no one word or idea can adequately express the full reality of our condition of dependence on God, Christ and Mary. There is nothing in human experience with which to compare it and no human language capable of expressing it. The New Testament makes use of several expressions, e. g., body and members, vine and branches, living stones, etc., in an attempt to supply the deficiency of human language. It calls us friends and servants, children and subjects. For if we are children of God, we are also His servants; if we are children of Mary, we are also her servants. If we must love God as our Father, we must also serve Him as our Lord; if we must love Mary as our mother, we must also serve her as our Lady and Queen. Does not the Catechism tell us we were made to love and serve God?

The Gospels call God our Father but also our Lord, not to minimize His paternity but to give a fuller idea of the reality and to more adequately express our condition as both creatures and adopted sons.

Thus also Montfort calls Mary "Mother and Mistress" and us "children and slaves." He does not substitute slave for child but adds it to child. This term contains an explicit recognition of our Lady's domination over souls, of her spiritual queenship, that follows necessarily her spiritual maternity and is necessary for its proper exercise. It also perfects the notion of child in this sense that it brings out the continuousness of dependence on Mary in the spiritual order, not implied in child as such. Furthermore, it is more dynamic, inasmuch as it implies service and activity and stresses the fact that one does not simply suffer passively as a child might

the maternal influence of Mary but must actively co-operate in the work of sanctification.

Neither child nor slave is, nor both combined are, exhaustive of the true and full reality of our relationship to God and, proportionately, to Mary. Our knowledge of the supernatural is necessarily analogical. We must approach the knowledge of the infinite simplicity of God from different angles and with many and varied concepts, each representing, and only imperfectly, one aspect of God's perfection; no one idea of the finite mind can represent the infinite perfection of God. Proportionately, only piecemeal and successively, can we hope to acquire a relatively accurate view of our position with regard to God and Mary. Child does not say all, slave or servant says less; both combined give us an indication of our fundamental condition as creatures and adopted sons and our fundamental obligations to love and serve. But even they are not exclusive; to approach completeness, it would be necessary to add "other perfections and privileges which are expressed by such beautiful titles as "Members of Christ," "Temples of the Holy Ghost," and so many others which, when taken together, give us a faint idea of what God has willed to do for us and in us." <sup>22</sup>

By the repeated use of these twin expressions, Mother and Mistress, Child and Slave, v. g., in the Act of Consecration which should epitomize his teaching and be a faithful reflection of his mind, Montfort indicates that in his whole conception of Marian doctrine and devotion both these considerations are fundamental. He conceives Mary's role as principally, though not exclusively, one of spiritual motherhood and this receives, by far, the greater part of his attention and development. However, the element of power and authority cannot be overlooked and Mary's queenship and our

<sup>22</sup> Cf. V. Devy, S.M.M., *Slave of Mary*, in *Queen of All Hearts*, vol. 2, No. 5, p. 3 ff.

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corresponding service are essential. We are children of God and children of Mary but we do not cease thereby to be their servants.

Some have understood the element of slavery in perhaps a slightly different manner, simply as a development in the line of childhood and introduced to help express the perfection of spiritual childhood. Slave would perfect the notion of child inasmuch as it would emphasize the all-inclusive, continuing and complete dependence on Mary in the order of grace. Thus a person would consecrate himself to Jesus in Mary as a slave for the sole reason of being a more perfect child, a child in plenitude and perfection. In the same way, Mistress would be understood only in the line of spiritual maternity and would add to this idea the complete domination and control of the whole life-giving process in the order of grace and express the maternity in all its plenitude and perfection.<sup>23</sup> In this explanation, Mary's queenship counts for little; in either or any explanation, her spiritual maternity is essential and is formally and explicitly presented as such in Montfort's writings, whether it be considered as supplying the exclusive or, at least, the principal basis for his devotional superstructure.

In all events, Montfort goes to great lengths to explain his use of the term slavery; he eliminates from it all element of constraint and servility and calls it a slavery of love or holy slavery. To find fault with the word slavery, says Garrigou-Lagrange, "is to forget that it is a slavery of love which accentuates rather than diminishes the filial character of our love for Mary."<sup>24</sup> It in no way precludes filial love toward Mary; nothing could be further from the truth or do

<sup>23</sup> Cf. J. M. Dayet, S.M.M., *La Maternité Spirituelle, fondement de la Parfaite Dévotion du Bx de Montfort*, in *La Revue des Prêtres de Marie, Reine des Coeurs*, May, 1934, p. 129-151; J. Thomas, *Consécration mariale; sens et conséquences doctrinales*, in *Consécration Mariale. Journées Sacerdotales d'Études Mariales, Namur, 1943*, Louvain, 1948, p. 38 ff.

<sup>24</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 307, footnote 27.

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more violence to both the spirit and the letter of Montfort's writings. Pius XII understood this when he said: "To the joyless austerity, the somber terror, the depressing pride of Jansenism Montfort opposed filial love, the confident, ardent, expansive and effective love of the devout servant of Mary."<sup>25</sup>

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Mary occupies a singular position in the Divine Plan. Our devotion, to be fully adequate, should correspond to this position.

This is not the time to elaborate further along these lines; suffice it to say that Montfort proposes his devotion as the logical consequence and the full and explicit recognition, in practice, of the place she occupies in the economy of salvation, as the perfect counterpart in the moral order of the ontological order of things as established by God. As her role is dependent and relative, his Act of Consecration will be addressed to her only as to the perfect means to reach Jesus Christ, our last end; as her role is universal and we find her exercising her maternity of grace all along the line, in every aspect, at every point of our spiritual life, so also Montfort's Consecration, and especially the way of life that follows, will be the adequate recognition of this dependence and will be universal in extent, supreme in degree, never-ending in duration.

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. Address to pilgrims following canonization of Saint Louis M. de Montfort. *L'Osservatore Romano*, July 23, 1947, p. 1, col. 4.