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*Mary, Our
Spiritual Mother*

WILLIAM G. MOST

Number 44

ABOUT THE AUTHOR . . .

Father Most's book, *MARY IN OUR LIFE*, aptly subtitled "Our Lady in Doctrine and Devotion," won the Marian Library Medal for 1954. Ordained in 1940, and a professor at Loras College, Dubuque, Iowa, since that time, Father Most has written for *The American Ecclesiastical Review*, *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, *The Marianist*, *The Classical Journal*, *The Classical Bulletin*, *Queen of All Hearts*, and *The Catholic Educational Review*.

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MARY, OUR SPIRITUAL MOTHER

WILLIAM G. MOST

GOD HAD MADE GREAT PLANS FOR OUR FIRST PARENTS, and, through them, for us. For He had not only given them the natural life of the body and the wonderful preternatural gifts, by which they were made immune to ignorance, to death, and even to the struggle of the flesh against the spirit. Far greater than all those, He had given them also another kind of life, the life of grace: He had really and literally given them a share in the nature and life of God Himself.

Within the Divine Trinity, there is a constant interchange of infinite knowledge and love: the Father, from all eternity, speaks a Word, which is the perfect expression of Himself. But it is not such a word as we speak, a mere vibration of the air, which endures but for a moment and is gone: the Word that the Father speaks is eternal, equal to Him. The Son IS the Word. This Father and this Son love each other. But again, their love is not just something passing—it is a Person, eternal, equal to them. This love IS the Holy Spirit. No wonder, then, that St. John the Apostle wrote: "God is love."¹

Such is the nature of the life of the Divine Trinity, a life of infinitely rich knowledge and incomprehensible love. It was this divine life in which our first parents were to take part at the end of their earthly course, when grace would blossom into the light of glory, so that they would know and love God face to face, in the same way (though not in the same degree) in which the Three Persons of the Blessed Trinity know and love one another!

The pure generosity of God—for He had no need of creatures—had planned that not only our first parents should have such gifts, if they were faithful, but that they should transmit them as an inheritance to all their descendants, including us. In this way Eve was to have been our Mother, not only physically, but also spiritually: she would have been in the fullest sense, the "Mother of all the living."²

Eve, as we know, sadly disappointed God. She, together with Adam, sinned, thereby bringing down ruin on all mankind: for she and Adam lost this divine life, and became unable to transmit it to us.

But, as St. Paul tells us, the Redemption more than makes up for the fall: "Where sin abounded, grace did more abound."³ Hence God provided a new Mother of all the living, a New Eve.

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IT IS NOT IN JUST SOME FIGURATIVE SENSE that Mary is called our spiritual Mother; nor is she merely a kindly person who has adopted us, though she did not bring us forth. In the fullest, most literal sense of the word, Mary is our spiritual Mother. For she conceived us at Nazareth, she shared in earning divine life for us on Calvary, and she brought us forth to the divine life in giving us our first sanctifying grace, and she nourishes and increases that life when she hands on to us every grace that we shall ever receive, even to the crowning grace of final perseverance that carries us over the threshold of death into the eternal mansions of Heaven.

Mary's spiritual motherhood of us began at the very moment of her consent to the Annunciation. As Pope Pius XII expressed it: "When the little maid of Nazareth uttered her **fiat** to the message of the angel . . . she became not only the Mother of God . . . but also . . . she became the Mother of all who . . . would be made one under the Headship of her divine Son."⁴ For we are all one with Christ: Mary could not become the Mother of Christ, the Head of the Mystical Body, without at the same time becoming the Mother of all the members of that same Body, which we are.

The beginning of Mary's motherhood of us was accomplished without pain: but it was not carried on without great anguish. For it was at the foot of the cross, where she ". . . endured suffering and almost death"⁵ and "gave up her Mother's right over her Son in order to procure the salvation of mankind . . . so that one can truly say that together with Christ she has redeemed the human race"—there it was that Mary paid dearly, as the associate of her dying Son, in earning divine life for us.

This life that Mary helped to earn for us there, in the midst of the bitter sea of suffering, is first given to us through Baptism, and is increased and strengthened in many ways, especially through the other Sacraments. But the fact that we receive the beginning and many an increase of this life through the Sacraments does not mean that it does **not** come through Mary: **all** graces, even the graces of the Sacraments, were earned for us by both Jesus and Mary, and come to us through their hands. As Pope Leo XIII wrote: ". . . absolutely nothing of that great treasury of grace which the Lord brought us . . . nothing of it is given to us except through Mary, for such is the will of God . . ."⁶

An ordinary Mother, once she has accomplished her role of giving human life to her child, continues to take care of that child as long as it needs her care. There must come, however, a time when that child no

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longer needs the care of the Mother, for it is no longer a child. Such is not the case in Mary's motherhood of us: in the spiritual life, we are always her children. Did not her Son tell us: "Unless you . . . become as little children you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven."⁷ We never grow so great that we do not need the care of Mary, for she is Mediatrix of all graces—of every grace, to the very end of our lives and our entrance into the home of our Father.

An ordinary Mother does not always know when a child is in need of help. Not so Mary: she always knows the individual needs of each of us. The fact that there are so many of us is no hindrance to her. For St. Thomas tells us that every soul in heaven, since it beholds the vision of God, sees in that vision all that concerns it in any way.⁸ The needs of each one do concern Mary: she is the Mother of all. Therefore, even though we are many, it is not difficult for her to know the needs of all of us. For, although the number is great, it is still not infinite, it is a limited number. And it is not too much for her soul to know, enlightened as it is by an unimaginable degree of the light of glory in Heaven.

Other mothers, even though they know the needs of a child, are sometimes unable—or even, in some unfortunate cases, unwilling to help. Mary is never unwilling to help; she is more eager to give us spiritual treasures than we are to receive them. Nor is she ever unable. As Pope Pius XII said: ". . . her kingdom is as vast as that of her Son and God, since nothing is excluded from her dominion."⁹ An ordinary mother must sometimes stand sadly by and see a child deprived of the life of the body. Mary, however, is not similarly helpless. For if a child of hers ever becomes so wicked as to throw away the life of the soul—for it cannot be taken from him, he can only throw it away—she is able, as Mediatrix of all graces, to obtain for him resurrection from the death of mortal sin, if only that wretched soul will contritely come to her and beg her to obtain the grace of pardon. But, even better, if we are faithful to her, she will obtain for us the grace never to lose this divine life.

MARY NOT ONLY BRINGS US FORTH INTO DIVINE LIFE: she desires most earnestly that we continue to grow, from virtue to virtue, ever advancing in love, until we are finally transformed into "perfect manhood, to the mature measure of the fullness of Christ."¹⁰

In order that we may grow by love into the likeness of Christ, Mary obtains for us both light that we may see what things we need to do, and strength to carry them out.

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In seeking for guidance from Mary, some souls make a foolish and dangerous mistake. Having asked for light, they wait expectantly for some feeling to strike them; when it does, they consider it an inspiration sent to them through Mary, and act accordingly. To proceed in this way is to expose oneself not only to self deception, but also to all the wiles of the evil one, who can easily play on our feelings to deceive us.

In many instances, it is quite easy to determine what our Mother wants us to do. First of all, she wants us, in imitation of her Divine Son and herself, always to obey all laws and commands issued by every lawful authority. Thus she, though she had no need of it, submitted to the ceremony of purification after the birth of Christ, while He accepted the painful rite of circumcision, as though He had been born in original sin. She wants us also to be diligent and faithful in carrying out all the duties of our state in life, just as she devotedly swept the house and prepared the meals, and just as her Divine Son dutifully helped St. Joseph in the carpenter shop before the time came at which He went about His Father's business.

There are other times when it is her wish, not so much that we act, but that we generously and joyfully suffer the varied difficulties and trials that Divine Providence may will to send us: just as she joyfully embraced the painful trial when the Holy Family had to fly into pagan Egypt, or as her Divine Son gladly bore the hardships of the life of a poor carpenter's Son.

But there are also times when the wishes of our Mother cannot be learned in these ways. For instance, both in **great and in small things**, we must make a decision when there is no law, no command, nor any obvious providential indication of her will. It is at such times that we must pray with even greater diligence for light and help. After we have made our prayer for light, then it is our task to attempt calmly to reason out the answer. It is usually helpful to ask ourselves: what would Mary, **what** would Jesus do if He or she were in this present situation? Here again we must interject a note of warning: we should beware of letting mere imagination provide the answer. For the evil one can easily work on our imagination—and even at best, the imagination is not a faculty suited to provide prudent guidance. When, therefore, we ask ourselves what Jesus or Mary would do, we should try to think out the answer, not to **imagine** or merely to **feel** an answer.

Very often merely asking what Mary would do will at once **show**

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us the answer. This is especially true when we are displeased or offended by someone; in our irritation, we are apt to think at length of what we "not only may but should do or say" to the other person. Our wounded feelings so easily make us feel like martyrs, or like ministers of the justice of God! But when we stop to ask ourselves: Could this thought really have been sent by Mary?—often it is as though a bubble has suddenly burst, and inside it we see our cheap, scheming selfishness, and perhaps also, the designing infernal enemy.

SPIRITUAL WRITERS ALSO GIVE A NUMBER of special rules which will assist us to recognize true graces of light, and to unmask false inspirations that come from self or from the evil one. St. Francis de Sales sums up the principal rules under three headings.¹¹

First of all, he would have us ask ourselves: Is this supposed inspiration really in harmony with my vocation? Is it in accord with the spiritually sound courses on which I have already embarked?—It is characteristic of the evil one to place before us a variety of apparently, or even really good goals; for he knows that perseverance and constancy are essential to spiritual growth. Therefore, if he can make us turn at one moment to this, and at another moment to that, even though some of the things proposed be quite good in themselves, he can lead us to many false starts, which yield more confusion than constructive results.

Secondly, we should notice whether or not an apparent inspiration is conducive to peace and calmness of heart. True divine inspirations ordinarily do not cause upset or turmoil. An excellent figure of the gentleness that normally characterizes the action of God's inspirations can be seen in the life of the great prophet Elias. On one occasion, a messenger of God spoke to Elias saying: "'Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the Lord.' And behold, the Lord passeth, and a great and strong wind before the Lord, overthrowing the mountains, and breaking the rocks in pieces: the Lord is not in the wind. And after the wind, an earthquake: the Lord is not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake a fire: the Lord is not in the fire. And after the fire, a whistling of a gentle air. And when Elias heard it, he covered his face with his mantle, and, coming forth, stood at the entering in of the cave: and behold, a voice . . ." ¹²

Of course, at times, especially when it is a case of prodding a sinner or a lukewarm soul to leave his evil state, a divine inspiration may cause some temporary disquiet: but deep and true peace is the ultimate result,

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which soon appears.

Finally—and this is the most important of all the rules of discernment—St. Francis bids us see that the alleged inspiration is in accord with obedience. For as he says: "In obedience all is secure, outside of it, all is to be suspected."¹³ That is, any decision that deals with an important matter, or with a long range policy that will affect many smaller matters, should be submitted to some authoritative guide, whether that be a superior in the exterior order, or a competent spiritual director. For if we attempt to rely on our own judgment, our selfish and disordered nature will soon lead us astray. Almost any prudent advisor would be safer to follow than our own will, for the mere fact that he is a different person makes it easier for him to be at least somewhat objective in looking at our proposals; while we tend to be misled by manifold subjective drives.

But there are some souls who seem to be trying faithfully to follow the guidance of Mary, and yet these souls will complain that they seem to make little if any progress. What is the reason for this situation?

Before giving the direct answer, we should comment that, as St. Francis de Sales points out, God does not, at least ordinarily, permit a soul to be able to see the exact state of its own progress.¹⁴ Therefore, it is quite possible for a soul to see no results, or to think itself deficient, while it is really moving ahead quite well.

But yet, it is probably true that many souls fail to achieve nearly the growth that they should be attaining.

THERE ARE MANY FACTORS THAT ARE probably the causes of this deficiency. Let us examine the principal causes of slow growth, considering them especially in relation to inspirations. For this purpose we might compare our minds to a sort of electrical indicator, having a needle whose function it is to register precisely the sort of current that is being received. In such an indicator, the incoming current is used to create a magnetic field, which causes the needle to assume the correct position. If, however, in addition to the delicate field created by the incoming current, there are certain distracting forces near the indicator, such as strong power lines, or large masses of magnetic materials, the indicator needle may be absolutely incapable of pointing in the proper way; it may be pulled more powerfully by the nearby lines than by the current which it ought to record.

Something very similar may happen in our minds; they ought to

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register with accuracy the delicate inflow from the Holy Spirit, which Mary obtains for us. But we, unfortunately, have within us many strong counter pulls. For our nature is inclined to evil because of original sin, and that inclination is increased by our personal sins. In addition, much contact, even thought it be without positive sin, with the bustle and pleasures of the world, tends to arouse within us strong desires for created things. With such powerful attractions and desires in us, we may be unable even to know that a divine inspiration is entering.

Hence, if an inspiration should come, suggesting that we do something opposed to these desires of ours, it may easily happen that our desires will be so strong that we will not even know that an inspiration has come at all. As Our Lord Himself told us: "Where thy treasure is, there is thy heart also."¹⁵ If our treasure lies in some earthly satisfaction, our heart may be so strongly pulled in the direction of that earthly thing that it cannot perceive at all the delicate voice of grace urging it heavenwards.

It is clear that we have a great need of mortification to subdue these lower attractions. For this reason, St. Francis de Sales, wishing to make us perfectly responsive to the voice of grace, counsels us to practice indifference to all worldly things.¹⁶ For worldly things are really of indifferent value as regards our salvation, since we can use them either for good or for evil: a thing that can be either good or evil for salvation must be itself of indifferent worth.

With the same purpose in view, St. John of the Cross underlines forcefully the need of such mortification as will bring our desires into subjection:

For this reason one must greatly lament the ignorance of certain men, who burden themselves with extraordinary penances and with other voluntary practices, and think that this practice or that will suffice to bring them to the union of Divine Wisdom: but such is not the case if they endeavor not diligently to mortify their desires. If they were careful to bestow half of that labour on this, they would profit more in a month than they profit by all the other practices in many years.¹⁷

Our desire for self-esteem and for the esteem of others is, as a rule, especially disorderly and troublesome: in other words, pride and vanity are strong in most persons. It is obvious that pride, even more than many other disordered desires, can easily make our minds unresponsive

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to spiritual inspirations. Hence there is great need for us to imitate the humility of the Handmaid of the Lord, and of Him who invited us: "Learn of me, for I am meek and humble of heart."¹⁸ For, as St. Peter says, "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble."¹⁹ This applies to all graces in general, and especially to graces of light and inspiration.

Still other souls suffer from the fact that the very atmosphere, as it were, in which they live, is so far out of harmony with things of the spirit that, in addition to the counter pull of their desires, they are also hampered by a sort of spiritual bluntness that makes them insensitive to the voice of grace. Souls such as these may even be quite faithful to the external routine of a devout life, while in their thoughts, they are habitually far from divine things. In other words, they lack habitual recollection.

Recollection and mental prayer may be compared to the breathing of the soul. The spiritual life, just like the life of the body, needs to be lived in an atmosphere congenial to it: if one's mind is ever filled with creatures, **even though the thoughts be perfectly innocent in themselves**, it becomes less easy to raise the mind and heart towards that land where our true treasure is found.

WE NEED, THEN, TO TRY TO REALIZE as often as we can, the presence of God, and the presence of our good Mother. Such habitual recollection can be developed only gradually; let us not, then make an attempt for a short period, and, failing to achieve great results quickly, give up in discouragement. We need to work perseveringly over a long period. Many things will aid us. One help is to form the habit of saying ejaculatory prayers at a great number of times throughout the day. We might make up a private list of a dozen or more times in our daily routine at which we will say such prayers, not mechanically, but with real recollection. Again, we might make use of the method of "small talk". Suppose there are two women in a room; each of them may be busy, and they may not carry on a continuous conversation; but yet, from time to time, one will comment to the other on what she is doing, how it is going, what she hopes to accomplish, and many such things. We can learn to converse with God or with His Blessed Mother in just such a way, frequently telling them what we are doing, how it is going, what we want to accomplish, and so on. That is not, of course, the most exalted form of prayer; but yet, if it is done out of love, it really is prayer, and will be a great aid towards keeping us more or less constantly in the realization

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of the presence of God or of Mary. We must remember, however, that in this life it is simply not possible that our recollection be perfectly continuous at all times: at best, it will be rather intermittent.

IF, THEN, WE LIVE ALWAYS IN HER PRESENCE, and listen responsively to her voice, she will lead us to imitate her own virtues, especially her burning love, her profound humility, and her universal mortification. She will show us that humility and mortification are needed not only to make us receptive to inspirations, but also to provide room for love. For it is only in the proportion in which, by the aid of these virtues, we empty ourselves of the disorders of self, that we shall become capable of being full of love. Therefore if we, under her guidance, do our part, and dispose ourselves well, she will not fail to obtain for us an ever growing measure of love. Especially, by causing us to experience her own great goodness, she will bring us to learn something of the infinite goodness of the God who is love, whose goodness finds so beautiful a reflection in her. And she will teach us at the same time, to love dearly all those who are made one under the Headship of her Divine Son.

Then our consecration to her will be no more formality of words: it will be a vital, a dynamic thing, for we shall really be giving ourselves entirely to her. Thus we shall truly imitate the ways of her Divine Son, who gave Himself so completely into her hands. Thus also, in giving her an all-pervading place in our lives, we shall imitate the ways of our Heavenly Father, who has made Mary the constant, inseparable associate and sharer with His Divine Son throughout all His works.

Notes

1. I John 4:16.
2. Genesis 3:20.
3. Romans 5:20.
4. Pius XII, to Marian Congress of Ottawa, Canada, June 19, 1947: AAS 39.271.
5. Benedict XV, *Inter Sodalitica*, March 22, 1918: AAS 10.182.
6. Leo XIII, *Octobrie Mense*, Sept 22, 1891: AAS 24.196.
7. Matt. 18:3.
8. St. Thomas, *Summa Theol.* III, q. 10, a. 2.
9. Pius XII, *Bendito seja*, May 13, 1946: AAS 38.266: quoted from *American Ecl. Review*, November, 1949, p. 358.
10. Ephesians 4:13.
11. St. Francis de Sales, *Treatise on the Love of God VIII, 11-13*.
12. III Kings 19:11-13.
13. St. Francis de Sales, *Treatise on the Love of God VIII, 13* (p. 360, Transl. of H. B. Mackey, Newman Press, Westminster, Md., 1949).
14. St. Francis de Sales, *Spiritual Conferences VIII*, pp. 135-36 (Transl. under supervision of Gasquet and Mackey, Newman Press, Westminster, Md., 1945.)
15. Matt. 6:21.
16. St. Francis de Sales, *Treatise on the Love of God IX, 4-16*.
17. St. John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel I 8:4*: in: *The Works of St. John of the Cross I*, pp. 42-43, transl. by E. Allison Peers, Newman Press, Westminster, Md., '46.
18. Matt. 11:29.
19. I Peter 5:5.

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