



The Holy See

LETTER OF JOHN PAUL II TO THE MONTFORT RELIGIOUS FAMILY

*To the Men and Women Religious
of the Montfort Families*

A classical text of Marian spirituality

1. A work destined to become a classic of Marian spirituality was published 160 years ago. St Louis Marie Grignion de Montfort wrote the *Treatise on True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin* at the beginning of the 1700s, but the manuscript remained practically unknown for more than a century. When, almost by chance, it was at last discovered in 1842 and published in 1843, the work was an instant success, proving extraordinarily effective in spreading the "true devotion" to the Most Holy Virgin. I myself, in the years of my youth, found reading this book a great help. "There I found the answers to my questions", for at one point I had feared that if my devotion to Mary "became too great, it might end up compromising the supremacy of the worship owed to Christ" (*Dono e Mistero*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1996; English edition: *Gift and Mystery*, Paulines Publications Africa, p. 42). Under the wise guidance of St Louis Marie, I realized that if one lives the mystery of Mary in Christ this risk does not exist. In fact, this Saint's Mariological thought "is rooted in the mystery of the Trinity and in the truth of the Incarnation of the Word of God" (*ibid.*).

Since she came into being, and especially in her most difficult moments, the Church has contemplated with special intensity an event of the Passion of Jesus Christ that St John mentions: "Standing by the Cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary, the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing near, he said to his mother, "Woman, behold, your son!". Then he said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!". And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home" (Jn 19: 25-27). Throughout its history, the People of God has experienced this gift of the crucified Jesus: the gift of his Mother. Mary Most Holy is truly our Mother who accompanies us on our pilgrimage of faith, hope and charity towards an ever more intense union with Christ, the one Saviour and Mediator of

salvation (cf. Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, nn. 60, 62).

As is well known, my episcopal coat of arms symbolically illustrates the Gospel text quoted above; the motto *Totus tuus* is inspired by the teaching of St Louis Marie Grignon de Montfort (cf. *Gift and Mystery*, pp. 42-43; *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*, n. 15). These two words express total belonging to Jesus through Mary: "*Tuus totus ego sum, et omnia mea tua sunt*", St Louis Marie wrote, and he translates his words: "I am all yours, and all that I have is yours, O most loving Jesus, through Mary, your most holy Mother" (*Treatise on True Devotion*, n. 233). This Saint's teaching has had a profound influence on the Marian devotion of many of the faithful and on my own life. It is a *lived teaching* of outstanding ascetic and mystical depth, expressed in a lively and passionate style that makes frequent use of images and symbols. However, the considerable development of Marian theology since St Louis Marie's time is largely due to the crucial contribution made by the Second Vatican Council. The Montfort teaching, therefore, which has retained its essential validity should be reread and reinterpreted today in the light of the Council.

In this Letter I would like to share with you, Men and Women Religious of the Montfort Families, a meditation on certain passages from the writings of St Louis Marie that may help us in these difficult times to nourish our faith in the maternal mediation of the Mother of the Lord.

"Ad Iesum per Mariam" To Jesus through Mary

2. St Louis Marie proposes the loving contemplation of the mystery of the Incarnation with unusual effectiveness. Authentic Marian devotion is Christocentric. Indeed, as the Second Vatican Council recalled, "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" (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, n. 65).

The love of God through union with Jesus Christ is the purpose of every genuine devotion, since Christ, as St Louis Marie wrote, "is our only Master who has to teach us; our only Lord on whom we ought to depend; our only Head to whom we must be united; our only Model to whom we should conform ourselves; our only Physician who can heal us; our only Shepherd who can feed us; our only Way who can lead us; our only Truth whom we must believe; our only Life who can animate us; and our only All in all things who can satisfy us" (*Treatise on True Devotion*, n. 61).

3. Devotion to the Blessed Virgin is a privileged means "of finding Jesus Christ perfectly, of loving him tenderly, of serving him faithfully" (*Treatise on True Devotion*, n. 62). St Louis immediately expands this central desire to "love tenderly" into a passionate prayer to Jesus, imploring him for the grace to participate in the indescribable communion of love that exists between him and his Mother.

Mary's total relativity to Christ and through him, to the Blessed Trinity, is first experienced in the

observation: "You never think of Mary without Mary interceding for you with God. You never praise or honour Mary without Mary's praising and honouring God with you. Mary is altogether relative to God; and indeed, I might well call her *the relation to God*. She only exists with reference to God. She is *the echo of God* that says nothing, repeats nothing, but God. If you say 'Mary', she says 'God'. St Elizabeth praised Mary and called her blessed because she had believed. Mary, the faithful echo of God, at once intoned: "*Magnificat anima mea Dominum*"; 'My soul magnifies the Lord' (Lk 1: 46). What Mary did then, she does daily now. When we praise her, love her, honour her or give anything to her, it is God who is praised, God who is loved, God who is glorified, and it is to God that we give, through Mary and in Mary" (cf. *Treatise on True Devotion*, n. 225).

Again, in prayer to the Mother of the Lord, St Louis Marie expresses the Trinitarian dimension of his relationship with God: "Hail Mary, beloved Daughter of the Eternal Father! Hail Mary, admirable Mother of the Son! Hail Mary, faithful Spouse of the Holy Spirit!" (*The Secret of Mary*, p. 71). Although this traditional greeting used earlier by St Francis of Assisi (cf. *Fonti Francescane*, 281) contains different levels of analogies, there is not a shadow of doubt that it expresses effectively Our Lady's special participation in the life of the Most Holy Trinity.

4. St Louis Marie contemplates all the mysteries, starting from the *Incarnation* which was brought about at the moment of the Annunciation. Thus, in the *Treatise on True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*, Mary appears as "the true terrestrial paradise of the New Adam", the "virginal and immaculate earth" of which he was formed (n. 261). She is also the *New Eve*, associated with the *New Adam* in the obedience that atones for the original disobedience of the man and the woman (cf. *ibid.*, n. 53; St Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, III, 21, 10-22, 4). Through this obedience, the Son of God enters the world. The Cross itself is already mysteriously present at the instant of the Incarnation, at the very moment of Jesus' conception in Mary's womb. Indeed, the *ecce venio* in the Letter to the Hebrews (cf. 10: 5-9) is the primordial act of the Son's obedience to the Father, an acceptance of his redeeming sacrifice already at the time "when Christ came into the world".

"*All our perfection*", St Louis Marie Grignion de Montfort writes, "*consists in being conformed, united and consecrated to Jesus Christ*; and therefore, the most perfect of all devotions is, without any doubt, that which most perfectly conforms, unites and consecrates us to Jesus Christ. Now, Mary being the most conformed of all creatures to Jesus Christ, it follows that, of all devotions, that which most consecrates and conforms the soul to Our Lord is devotion to his holy Mother, and that the more a soul is consecrated to Mary, the more it is consecrated to Jesus" (*Treatise on True Devotion*, n. 120). In addressing Jesus, St Louis Marie expresses the marvel of the union between the Son and the Mother: "She is so transformed into you by grace that she lives no more, she is as though she were not. It is you only, my Jesus, who lives and reigns in her.... Ah! If we knew the glory and the love which you receive in this admirable creature.... She is so intimately united with you.... She loves you more ardently and glorifies you more perfectly than all the other creatures put together" (*ibid.*, n. 63).

Mary, an 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 pre-eminent and as a wholly unique member of the Church, and as her type and outstanding model in faith and charity" (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 53). The Mother of the Redeemer is also uniquely redeemed by him in her Immaculate Conception and has preceded us in that perseverance in faithful and loving attention to the Word of God that leads to blessedness (cf. *ibid.*, n. 58). For this reason too, Mary "is also intimately united to the Church. As St Ambrose taught, the Mother of God is a type (*typus*) of the Church in the order of faith, charity and perfect union with Christ. For in the mystery of the Church, which is herself rightly called mother and virgin, the Blessed Virgin stands out in eminent and singular fashion as exemplar both of virgin and mother" (*ibid.*, n. 63). The Council itself contemplates Mary as "*the Mother of the members of Christ*" (cf. *ibid.*, nn. 53, 62), and consequently, Paul VI proclaimed her as *Mother of the Church*. The doctrine of the Mystical Body that most forcefully expresses Christ's union with the Church is also the biblical foundation of this affirmation. "The head and the members are born of one and the same Mother" (*Treatise on True Devotion*, n. 32), as St Louis Marie reminds us. In this sense, we can say that, through the work of the Holy Spirit, the members are united and conformed to Christ the Head, 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" (*The Secret of Mary*, n. 11).

In Christ, the Only-Begotten Son of the Father, we are truly children of the Father, and at the same time, sons and daughters of Mary and of the Church. In a certain way, it is the whole of humanity that is reborn in the virgin birth of Jesus. "These words can be attributed better to the Mother of the Lord than to St Paul of himself: "My little children, with whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you!" (Gal 4: 19). Every day I give birth to the children of God until Jesus Christ my Son be formed in them in the fullness of his age" (*Treatise on True Devotion*, n. 33). This doctrine is expressed most beautifully in the prayer: "O Holy Spirit, give me great devotion to Mary, your faithful spouse; give me great confidence in her maternal heart and an abiding refuge in her mercy, so that *by her you may truly form in me Jesus Christ*" (*The Secret of Mary*, p. 81).

One of the loftiest expressions of St Louis Marie Grignion de Montfort's spirituality refers to the identification of the faithful with Mary in her love for Jesus and in her service to Jesus. Meditating on St Ambrose's well-known text: "*Let the soul of Mary be in each of us to magnify the Lord, and the spirit of Mary be in each of us to rejoice in God*" (*Expos. in Luc.*, 12, 26: PL 15, 1561), he writes: "A soul is happy indeed when... it is all possessed and overruled *by the spirit of Mary, a spirit meek and strong, zealous and prudent, humble and courageous, pure and fruitful*" (*Treatise on True Devotion*, n. 258). Mystical identification with Mary is fully directed to Jesus, as he says in the prayer: "Finally, dearly beloved Mother, grant, if it be possible, that I may have no other spirit but yours, to know Jesus and his divine will; that I may have no other soul but yours, to praise and glorify the Lord; that I may have no other heart but yours, to love God with a love as pure and ardent as yours" (*The Secret of Mary*, pp. 71-72).

Holiness, the perfection of charity

6. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* states: "But 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" (n. 65). Holiness is the *perfection of charity*, of love of God and neighbour that is the object of Jesus' greatest Commandment (cf. Mt 22: 38). It is also the greatest gift of the Holy Spirit (cf. I Cor 13: 13). Thus, in his *Canticles* St Louis Marie presents to the faithful in this order the excellence of charity (*Canticle 5*), the light of faith (*Canticle 6*) and the firmness of hope (*Canticle 7*).

In Montfort spirituality, the dynamism of charity is expressed in particular by the symbol of the *slavery of love to Jesus*, after the example and with the motherly help of Mary. It is a matter of full communion in the *kenosis* of Christ, communion lived with Mary, intimately present in the mysteries of the life of her Son. "There is nothing among Christians which makes us more absolutely belong to Jesus Christ and his holy Mother than the slavery of the will, according to the example of Jesus Christ himself, who took on the status of a servant for love of us" - *formam servi accipiens* - "and also according to the example of the holy Virgin who called herself the servant and handmaid of the Lord (Lk 1: 38). The Apostle refers to himself as "the slave of Christ" (*servus Christi*) as though the title were an honour. Christians are often so called in the Holy Scriptures" (cf. *Treatise on True Devotion*, n. 72). Indeed, the Son of God, who came into the world out of obedience to the Father in the Incarnation (cf. Heb 10: 7), subsequently humbled himself by making himself obedient unto death, and death on the Cross (cf. Phil 2: 7-8). Mary responded to God's will with the total gift of herself, body and soul, forever, from the Annunciation to the Cross and from the Cross to the Assumption. The obedience of Christ and the obedience of Mary are not, of course, symmetrical because of the *ontological difference* between the divine Person of the Son and the human person of Mary. This also explains the resulting exclusivity of the fundamental salvific efficacy of obedience to Christ, from whom his own Mother received the grace to be able to obey God totally and thus collaborate in the mission of her Son.

The *slavery of love* should therefore be interpreted in light of the wonderful exchange between God and humanity in the mystery of the incarnate Word. It is a true exchange of love between God and his creature in the reciprocity of total self-giving. The "spirit [of this devotion] consists in this: that we be interiorly dependent on Mary Most Holy; that we be slaves of Mary, and through her, of Jesus" (*The Secret of Mary*, n. 44). Paradoxically, this "bond of charity", this "slavery of love", endows the human being with full freedom, with that true freedom of the children of God (cf. *Treatise on True Devotion*, n. 169). It is a question of giving oneself to Jesus without reserve, responding to the Love with which he first loved us. Those who live in this love can say with St Paul: "It is no longer I who live, but 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" (n. 19). This was the path that Mary followed throughout her earthly life and it is the path of the pilgrim Church until the end of time. The Second Vatican Council placed great emphasis on Mary's faith, mysteriously shared by the Church, shedding light on the journey of Our Lady from the moment of the Annunciation to the moment of the redemptive Passion (cf. Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, nn. 57, 67; Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Mater*, nn. 25-27).

In the writings of St Louis Marie we find the same accent on the faith lived by the Mother of Jesus in her journey from the Incarnation to the Cross, a faith in which Mary is the model and type of the Church. St Louis Marie expresses this with a range of nuances, when in his letter he expounds on the "marvellous effects" of perfect Marian devotion: "The more, then, that you gain the favour of that august Princess and faithful Virgin, the more will you act by pure faith; a pure faith which will put you above all sensible consolations and extraordinary favours; a lively faith animated by charity, which will enable you to perform all your actions from the motive of pure love; a faith firm and immovable as a rock, through which you will rest quiet and constant in the midst of storms and hurricanes; a faith active and piercing, which like a mysterious skeleton key, will give you entrance into all the mysteries of Jesus, the ultimate goal of man, and into the heart of God himself; a courageous faith, which will enable you to undertake and carry out without hesitation great things for God and for the salvation of souls; lastly, a faith which will be your blazing torch, your divine life, your hidden treasure of divine wisdom and your omnipotent arms, which you will use to enlighten those who are in the darkness of the shadow of death, to inflame those who are lukewarm and who have need of the heated gold of charity, to give life to those who are dead through sin, to touch and move by your meek and powerful words the hearts of stone and the cedars of Lebanon, and finally, to resist the devil and all the enemies of salvation" (cf. *Treatise on True Devotion*, n. 214).

Like St John of the Cross, St Louis Marie insists above all on the purity of faith and its essential and often sorrowful darkness (cf. *The Secret of Mary*, nn. 51-52). Contemplative faith, by giving up tangible or extraordinary things, penetrates the mysterious depths of Christ. Thus, in his prayer, St Louis Marie addresses the Mother of the Lord saying: "I do not ask you for visions, revelations, sensible devotion or spiritual pleasures.... Here below, I wish for nothing other than that which was yours: to believe sincerely without spiritual pleasures" (*ibid.*, p. 72). The Cross is the crowning moment 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" (n. 18).

A sign of sure hope

8. The Holy Spirit invites Mary to reproduce her own virtues in the elect, extending in them the

roots of her "invincible faith" and "firm hope" (cf. *Treatise on True Devotion*, n. 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" (Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, n. 68). This eschatological dimension is contemplated by St Louis Marie especially when he speaks of the "apostles of the latter times" formed by the Blessed Virgin to bring to the Church Christ's victory over the forces of evil (cf. *Treatise on True Devotion*, nn. 49-59). This is in no way a form of "millenarianism", but a deep sense of the eschatological character of the Church linked to the oneness and saving 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 and to extend to the very ends of the earth and the end of time the work of Christ, the one Saviour.

In the antiphon *Salve Regina*, the Church calls the Mother of God "our Hope". The same term is used by St Louis Marie who took it from a text of St John Damascene, who applies to Mary the biblical symbol of the anchor (cf. *Hom I in Dorm. B.V.M.*, 14: PG 96, 719): "'We fasten our souls'", he says, "'to your hope, as to an abiding anchor'. It is to her that the saints who have saved themselves have been the most attached and have done their best to attach others, in order to persevere in virtue. Happy, then, a thousand times happy, are the Christians who are now fastened faithfully and entirely to her, as to a firm anchor!" (*Treatise on True Devotion*, n. 175). Through the devotion to Mary, Jesus himself "enlarges the heart with firm confidence in God, making it look upon him as a Father" (*ibid.*, n. 169).

Together with the Blessed Virgin and with the same maternal heart, the Church prays, hopes and intercedes for the salvation of all men and women. The Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* concludes with these words: "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" (n. 69).

As I once again make my own this hope which I expressed, along with the other Council Fathers almost 40 years ago, I send to the entire Montfort Family a special Apostolic Blessing.

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

JOHN PAUL II

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