

THE IMPORTANCE OF DEVOTION TO MARY

Hail, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee; blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

HONOURING CHRIST'S MOTHER

This leaflet is about the importance of Devotion to Mary and I want to start with two quotations which can serve as reference points. The first is from the beginning of St. Luke's Gospel where, in the first chapter, we read Elizabeth's words to Mary: *'.. blessed is she who has believed, because the things promised her by the Lord shall be accomplished'* and then, in her reply, Mary says: *'behold, henceforth all generations shall call me blessed'*. The other quotation is from the official documents of the second Vatican Council - *Lumen Gentium* - the Dogmatic Constitution of the Church. This document reaffirms what the Church has proclaimed ever since the Council of Ephesus ... and that is, that paying homage to the Mother of God, who is our Mother too, has a special place in the Church: *'While honouring Christ's Mother, these devotions cause her Son to be rightly known, loved and glorified, and all His commands observed'*.

Now, what is devotion? It is primarily a disposition or attitude of the will from which springs acts that are expressions of that devotion - in other words, it is a readiness to do whatever gives honour to God by means of worship and service. St. Louis Marie de Montfort explained the distinctive character of devotion to Mary as: *'giving ourselves entirely and altogether to Our lady in order to belong entirely and altogether to Jesus by her'*. Perhaps that is worth repeating: *'giving ourselves entirely and altogether to Our Lady in order to belong entirely and altogether to Jesus by her'*.

That would seem beautifully to conform to the statement from *Lumen Gentium* quoted above. Going on in this same theme to quote from the Handbook of the Legion of Mary: *'Everything is safe with Our Lady. She is the guardian of the treasures of God Himself. She is capable of being the guardian of the concerns of those who place their trust in her'*. Legionaries are required to propagate everything Catholic and to ensure that the Virgin Mary be brought and taught to everyone - young and old alike - for she is the Mother of each and every one of us.

TRADITIONAL ALLEGIANCE

In the fifth century a writer declared that Mary was revered throughout the whole universe. What a lovely echo of those words *'all generations shall call me blessed'* - and would that it were true today. In those early centuries, public veneration by the Church and the personal response of the faithful multiplied enthusiasm for Marian devotion to the point that St. Bernard was able to sum it up like this - emphasising the confidence and childlike trust which the devotion expressed. This is what he wrote: *'Are you in danger, in trouble, in doubt? Think of Mary, call upon Mary - if you follow her guidance you will not go astray - if you appeal to her you will not lose hope - if she supports you, you will not stumble - if she protects you, you will not be afraid - if she leads you, you will not grow weary - under her kindness you will reach your goal'*. The Church traditionally designates May and October as special months for devotion to Mary - Our Lady. But every month, indeed every day, can be a time for that devotion and we are often reminded of that privilege by the feasts and festivals of the Church. For example, during the month of August we celebrate the Feasts of St Alphonsus Liguori and St John Vianney both of whom had a great devotion to Our Lady; we remember the ordination of St Pio of Pietrelcina (Padre Pio) whose love for Mary could not be surpassed and who remarked: *'She is everyone's Mother'*. Also in August we celebrate the Feast of St Maximilian Kolbe who, when launching his crusade of Mary Immaculate, said this: *'We want to emphasise that the shortest and surest way to conversion and sanctification is Mary Immaculate'*. The motto of his Crusade was *'to lead each and every soul, through Mary, to the most Sacred Heart of Jesus'*. The aim of that Crusade was quite simply stated in these words: *'the whole world - and each single soul - must be conquered for her as quickly as possible and then the Kingdom of the Sacred Heart will reign - through her - throughout the whole world'*. You see, it does not claim uniqueness - it claims expediency. Mary must become the Queen of all souls and of each individual soul. Perhaps that might be reflected upon by those who brush Mary aside and those who, sadly, denigrate her or treat her as an irrelevance.

PRAYING THE ROSARY

Again, it is in August that we celebrate the Feast of St. Dominic to whom Our Lady revealed that most powerful of all spiritual weapons - the Holy Rosary. I have a delightful little book entitled *Our Glorious Faith - and how to lose it!* written by a devout and traditional Jesuit priest. In it he gives the main reasons why so many Catholics have lost the faith - and he places neglect of the family Rosary high on the list. One story he relates concerns a man, a great Catholic, a 'pillar of the parish', whose children had all lapsed one after the other. It was supposed that this man had been brought up to recite the family Rosary as a boy and that his children had not. In fact this was the case. The man had, indeed, recited the Rosary with the family at home when he was a boy and when he got married and started his own family they all said the Rosary together. But then, one evening, when they were about to start, one of the children switched on the television and that was that. The custom of the family Rosary was dropped and in due course they gave up the practice of the Faith. One of the reasons why God sent his Mother to Fatima in 1917 was to tell us that we should say the Rosary every day. There were no other prayers she asked us to say. Accordingly, we should do what she asked.

About three years ago my wife and I were talking with a Lutheran lady who knew very little about Mary. In keeping with her strict Lutheran beliefs she considered Our Lady as being of no particular importance. However, by the grace of God, after a while she wanted to know more about the Rosary. Soon she acquired some rosary beads and began to meditate on the mysteries. But - and here's a lesson perhaps for many Catholics - she said all fifteen mysteries every day and took two hours doing so. We had not seen her for some months when my wife said to her one day on the telephone: '*Are you still saying the Rosary?*', to which the reply was: '*Do you still talk to your mother?*' As a result of her encounter with Mary that lady may one day come into full communion with the True Church.

QUEEN OF HEAVEN AND EARTH

August, of course, brings us another magnificent Feast, The Assumption, closely followed by the Queenship of Mary. These celebrations remind us not only of Our Lady's unique role in God's plan of salvation but also the honour that is due to her in that position. At the same time, we must not overlook her motherly concern for us and that we are in daily need of her protection. Does that not, at the very least, deserve a response from us by way of renewed commitment and deeper devotion?

The importance of this devotion is not just for ourselves but for all those people with whom we come into contact - in our families, in our neighbourhood, at our place of work and especially among young people as well as our non-Catholic and non-Christian friends. Why is it so important? Quite simply because Mary leads us quickly and quietly to her Son - she has a maternal concern for our eternal wellbeing.

MARY'S DOWRY

This subject always calls to mind St. John Fisher, St. Thomas More and the Forty Martyrs of England & Wales. Those men and women died for the Faith at a time when, amongst the other Reformation sacrileges, statues of Our Lady were being smashed to pieces in the mistaken belief that it would wipe out trust in her power to intercede for us. Yet barely two centuries earlier Thomas Arundel, Archbishop of Canterbury had spoken these moving words: '*We English, being servants of Mary's own inheritance and liegemen of her especial dowry - as we are commonly called - ought to surpass others in the warmth of our praise and devotion!*' That Dowry was established by certain kings, notably Edward III and Richard II kneeling before Our Lady and making an offering of England to her. In fact, it has been said that devotion to Mary is the hallmark of the true Catholic - or, to put it another way, devotion to Our Lord without an accompanying devotion to Mary, is a Protestant devotion. As a convert to the Catholic Church I can say that with conviction - from personal experience. Furthermore, I venture to suggest that this country has steadily declined, spiritually speaking, ever since Mary was rejected and pushed aside during the Reformation. Neglect of Our Lady's role in God's plan of salvation has been a great loss to this country. Furthermore, the abandonment of our true Catholic heritage - and the consequent loss to England of the graces and blessings of its Sacramental life - is something for which, I believe, we are still suffering.

It is no exaggeration to say that we now live in a secular, pagan society. The pressures resulting from what is socially acceptable have increased to an alarming degree. One only has to consider the authorised daily killing of more than 500 unborn babies to realise the truth of this. Would Satan have been so successful if we had still been truly '*liegemen of Mary's especial dowry*' ??

OBEDIENCE, HUMILITY - AND STILLNESS

Far from being a superficial sentimentality or a self-centred seeking of favours, as some critics would have it, true devotion to Mary leads to those God-given characteristics of a well-founded and fruitful spiritual life - obedience and humility. These qualities, so often disparaged today, are essential for the life of holiness to which each and every one of us is called. Devotion to Mary helps us to follow more closely the liturgical year - indeed it cannot be otherwise as we try to see events through her eyes. Mary is always our example and our model - as every good mother must be. Let me illustrate this briefly. Some while ago my wife and I came across a book of Lenten sermons preached in Westminster Cathedral in 1947. In one of them was this beautiful passage: *'When you tread again, with Christian tradition, the road to Calvary, you recall again the meeting between Jesus and His Mother. But you notice there is no word spoken, no action done. It is the same at the end. She stands at the foot of the cross but she is silent - and still. And indeed what you notice about the story of the Passion as a whole is the striking contrast between the quiet stillness of those who love Him and the ceaseless activity of his enemies... So, when you follow with love and sorrow this story of the Cross and you want to help, you want to do something for the pain and the sorrow, you want to comfort - never think that there is nothing you can do. Think deeply and love deeply and then you will have no need of words. Your sympathy and your co-suffering will go straight from your heart to the heart of Christ.'* The stillness of Mary. We should, indeed model ourselves on her.

KNEEL BESIDE MARY

Without digressing from my theme I must make mention of Perpetual Adoration. If Mary is established in our hearts and in our homes then, naturally, we will be drawn more strongly to spending time adoring and consoling Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament. When we are in adoration we kneel beside Mary and share in her co-suffering. Our reparation is made in stillness and silence. The forces of evil are active twenty four hours a day, seven days a week, perpetually - *'the ceaseless activity of his enemies'* - especially through the media - and particularly so among our young people. We must look seriously and urgently at establishing Perpetual Adoration in our parishes as a way of combating these forces of evil. The Feast of Our Lady of Sorrows (in September) marks the start of the Novena to Our Lady of Ransom. I commend this Novena to you because among the intentions that can be prayed for is one that echoes what we have been considering here: *'That our country's unique distinction as the Dowry of Mary may be better known and appreciated by all our fellow Christians so that through our Lady's intercession we may maintain the standards of her Son in contemporary society'*.

PRESERVING THE FAITH

Devotion to Mary is set squarely on the foundations of the Gospels and the Teaching Authority of the Church. That devotion is important not only because Mary is our model and our mother, leading us to her Son, but also - and this is the heart of the matter - because devotion to Mary is an integral and inseparable part of the Catholic Faith which it is our privilege to have received - our duty to preserve - and our responsibility to pass on intact. That is why I conclude with this traditional prayer:

The Prayer for England.

'O Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God and our most gentle Queen and Mother, look down in mercy upon England, your Dowry, and upon us all who greatly hope and trust in you. By you it was that Jesus, our Saviour and hope, was given to the world; and He has given you to us that we may hope still more. Plead for us your children, whom you did receive and accept at the foot of the Cross, O sorrowful Mother. Intercede for our separated brethren, that with us in the one true fold they may be united to the Chief Shepherd, the Vicar of your Son. Pray for us all, dear Mother, that by faith fruitful in good works we may all deserve to see and praise God, together with you in our heavenly home. Amen.'

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