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### Marian Devotion in Sixteenth-Century Latin America: In Light of Handbooks of Catechesis

Jean-Marie Salgado

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## MARIAN DEVOTION IN SIXTEENTH-CENTURY LATIN AMERICA: IN LIGHT OF HANDBOOKS OF CATECHESIS

When I spent several months at the Marian Library of the University of Dayton (Ohio) in 1976, I had the sole purpose of preparing a paper for the International Congress of Mariology, which was to be held in Saragossa (Spain) in October 1979. As a matter of fact, with the kind help of Fr. Theodore Koehler, S.M., I decided at that time to study "Marian Devotion in the Sixteenth Century in Light of the Handbooks of Catechesis in Latin America and Spain." I then spent the whole year, 1976-1977, gathering the material for that work.

In 1978, I was invited by the French Mariological Society to prepare a paper for their annual meeting; I am grateful to Fr. Koehler and Fr. René Laurentin who used their influence for that. The very same year, I was further invited, by the President of the French Society and the President of the International Academy of Mariology in Rome, to extend my inquiry to include Italy. In this manner, what began as a relatively brief paper has become nearly a book.\*

I thank, of course, first of all Our Blessed Mother for having given me the opportunity of doing such a work for Her. I thank also all those who have contributed to that work, especially Fr. Theodore Koehler.

For this convention, I was invited to describe the place of Marian devotion in the catechesis of sixteenth-century Latin America. I am sorry not to be able simply to give a summary, but that

\*The entire text of this study by Father Jean-Marie Salgado, O.M.I., will be published later in *Marian Library Studies*, University of Dayton, Dayton, Ohio 45469. For the catechetical teaching in Mexico during the sixteenth century, see "Catechisms in Colonial Spanish America" (by D. E. Tanck) in *NCE* 3, 232-234.

would be too dry. So I have decided instead to talk about one of the manuals used in Mexico. Nevertheless, I will give as an introduction some idea of the catechesis in sixteenth-century Latin America in general and in Mexico in particular.

Mexico was discovered in 1518. We find the first *Doctrina Christiana* printed in Mexico in 1539; from this time up to the end of the sixteenth century, there were about fifty such manuals printed in Mexico and used by the missionaries. I was able to locate and deal with only nineteen of these, but that proves one thing: it shows that the Spanish did not do, as some used to reproach them, merely a work of "Sacramentalization." They also preached the Gospel; they did the work of "Evangelization." Besides that, when we consider the richness of these handbooks with regard to their treatment of Marian Doctrine, we more easily understand the depth of the devotion towards Our Lady in Latin America; it is not a devotion based wholly on feelings, as critics used to say a couple of years back.

When we compare the manuals used in Mexico and the ones used in South America ("el Reyno del Pirú"), there are some slight differences. The ones used in South America were written by the Jesuits, so they have more or less the style of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. Nevertheless, we do find one work, *Simbolo Catolico Indiano*, written by a Franciscan who was a native of Peru, to be a genuine treasure, quite similar to the manuals of Mexico. Those composed in Mexico manifest a more exuberant style and are richer in their doctrinal presentation. Therefore, I have chosen to treat of one particular handbook from Mexico, because it was a kind of "best-seller"; it was printed three times in less than three years (January 1548, February 1550, April 1550).

. . . *Doctrina Christiana/en lengua Española y  
Mexicana: hecha por/los religiosos de la  
orden de sancto Domingo./*

The only complete extant copy of this *Doctrina Christiana*, composed by the Dominicans, is to be found at the Henry E.

Huntington Library in San Marino, California. There are two incomplete copies: one is at the New York Public Library, and the other is located at the *Biblioteca Nacional* in Madrid. The latter has been printed in facsimile. For the present work I have used photocopies of all three; having studied and compared them, I can affirm that there are no differences among them, at least as regards Marian doctrine.

The *Doctrina Christiana*, published by the Dominicans in 1548, was merely a revival of the text of Pedro de Cordoba, printed in 1544 by order of the Bishop of Mexico. However, it is important to note two new developments: on the one hand, the Spanish text and the Mexican translation were printed in two parallel columns; on the other hand, after the *Doctrina breue* (The brief doctrine), it seemed good to the editors to add a broad exposition of Christian doctrine. Thus we have thirty "sermoncicos." In other words, we have in one and the same work the student's book and the teacher's book. Since the catechists did not always have the desired preparation, one could almost say that these *sermoncicos* constituted a kind of sermon collection for the use of missionaries who had no libraries.

First of all, we notice that in the four engravings which illustrate this manual, itself truly a pearl of doctrinal wealth, the Blessed Virgin is in the foreground. Thus, at the beginning of the *Doctrina breue*, we find the Annunciation; on folio 10, the Presentation of the Virgin at the Temple and again the Annunciation; and, finally, after the *corretorio*, the Annunciation is presented once more, as well as the descent of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. Then, beginning with the *Doctrina breue* itself, in the first article of the Creed, we read the following concerning the humanity of the Incarnate Word:

. . . The first [article] is: to believe that the son of God Jesus Christ became man for us through the power and work of the Holy Spirit. The second one is: that *he was born of the gentle and precious Virgin Mary, his mother without ever being tainted.*

Although the *Doctrina breue* is very succinct, we readily note its

insistence on the total and perpetual virginity of the Mother of God. We notice, too, the epithets used to honor the Virgin of Nazareth ("the gentle and precious virgin"); these two qualifiers were used repeatedly. Therefore, it seems worthwhile to point out how charged with meaning they are: only costly objects can be classed among precious things; it is thus, for instance, that we speak of the very *Precious Blood* of Our Divine Redeemer. On the other hand, though being "precious," the Holy Virgin remains accessible to all by her "gentleness" (*the gentle virgin*), in other words, by her great mercy and her goodness.

Having studied the *Doctrina breue*, we turn to examine the *sermoncicos*. Their exposition of the miracles of the virginal conception and birth comprises a true gem. In no other Mexican manual do we find language so appropriate for exalting the Blessed Virgin to the utmost; at the same time, we recognize in them an exposition adapted to the simplest minds. With these considerations in mind, we present the following excerpts:

(fol. 52-53b: *Sermon eleven on the first Article of the humanity*.  
 . . . the son of God took our flesh miraculously through his power  
 . . . *And that precious flesh of his was given him by the queen of heaven holy Mary: and in her virginal womb* the son of God took it on when he descended from heaven. *And he was formed by a very great miracle . . . and not by work of a man but by the power of the Holy Spirit: for the queen of the high heavens remained forever a virgin*, just as she had been before . . . when our God decided to come and become man and to take flesh in *the sacred womb of his gentle mother*: he sent a very beautiful and gracious Angel from heaven, Saint Gabriel by name/who came to announce to *the precious mother of our God* by order of our great King and Lord: the way in which the son of God wanted to take flesh in *her sacred womb* and become man . . . And as the angel said to her the words that God sent him to speak/then *the queen of heaven* replied and said to the angel. Here I am as servant of the most high God and Lord of mine: let it be done in me according to his holy will: and according to your word. And then, at that moment *the son of God descended into her virginal womb* and took and formed his tiny little body from *the very pure and precious blood of the queen of heaven*. At that moment he created a soul, very precious, very

beautiful, and totally full of grace, and he enclosed it and placed it in that tiny sacred body. And the son of God received and took to himself that body and soul/and all together was made one person: it is good to know, true God and true man. And even though his body was very small, *being in the womb of his gentle mother*, he was a perfect man in knowledge: because *being in the virginal womb of his most holy mother* he knew excellently all that he knows now . . . And our great king and Lord Jesus Christ son of God *was nine months in that sacred virginal womb of the glorious virgin saint Mary his mother: . . . he was born from the womb of his most holy Mother, the ever virgin Mary: the queen of heaven his very precious mother: . . . And our lady saint Mary queen of heaven truly gave birth to the son of God as man.* And in this way he took human flesh *in the sacred womb of his precious mother and ever virgin holy Mary. . . .*

(fol. 54-54b: *Sermon twelve on the second Article about the humanity* . . . The second Article on the precious humanity of the son of God is that we must believe *that he was miraculously born of the ever-virgin holy Mary, His Mother. Who remained ever virgin when she gave birth to our great king and Lord Jesus Christ: in such a way that the glorious queen of heaven never lost her untarnished virginity: and thus she conceived her precious son Jesus Christ as man: thus she gave birth to him as man miraculously and was always virgin/before she gave birth to him/virgin before childbirth/and virgin during childbirth/and virgin after childbirth.* As a ray of sunshine goes through glass or a glass window without any injury, and without the glass cracking or breaking in any place. So too, when our redeemer Jesus Christ was born, *his most gentle mother and our lady the virgin holy Mary did not suffer any harm: There was no rupture in any part nor any opening of her precious body: rather he went forth from her blessed and sacred womb miraculously. . . .*

It is immediately apparent that certain expressions are constantly repeated in these pages. Whenever the Virgin is mentioned, the Manual calls her "the queen of heaven," "the queen of the high heavens," or "the precious mother of our God," "the mother of mercy," "the glorious virgin holy Mary," "our Lady holy Mary queen of heaven," "the glorious Queen of heaven." Likewise, every time that the virginal conception and birth are

spoken of, the author employs terms that summon one to reverence and to veneration: "to be enfleshed in the sacred womb of his gentle mother," "to take human flesh in her sacred womb," "descended into her virginal womb," "formed his body from the most pure and precious blood of the Queen of heaven," "being in the womb of his gentle mother," "was in that sacred virginal womb of the glorious virgin saint Mary his mother," "was born from the womb of his most holy mother and ever virgin Mary, and the queen of heaven his very precious mother," "the glorious Queen of Heaven never lost her untarnished virginity," "his most gentle mother and our Lady the Virgin holy Mary did not suffer any harm," "he went forth miraculously from her blessed and sacred womb," "only his most precious mother, the queen of heaven blessed and ever virgin, nursed him and gave him to suckle celestial milk."

The accumulation of so many sublime expressions is intended to help the spirit rise to the level of the great Mystery of the Incarnation; and to avoid the temptation of seeing only flights of oratory, one has only to remember that the Blessed Virgin is Mother of Mercy and Queen of Heaven *officially* from the moment of her Fiat at the Annunciation. That is the reason why the Manual made the Angel Gabriel kneel before the Virgin of Nazareth and put the following discourse on his lips:

(fol. 154-154b) . . . The angel said further to the Virgin Mary, "*Dominus tecum*," which means, "the Lord is with you": for which reason the angel had her in greatest esteem: and he bowed to her *and in his respect he knelt: because the Lord was with her. And the angel—so to say—wanted to tell her: O most precious queen I have the greatest reverence for you and the greatest esteem: because my great king and Lord God is with you.*

The Manual refers back to the perpetual virginity of the Mother of God (especially the virginity *in partu*) when it talks about the resurrection of the Savior:

(fol. 68b-69) . . . *Sermon XV on the fifth Article on the humanity.*

. . . And when our great Lord Jesus rose from the dead: no part of the sepulchre was opened: but all happened as when he was born of his most holy and ever virgin mother holy Mary/and he went forth miraculously with no detriment to his sacred mother nor with any opening of her virginal body: but she remained forever virgin: likewise when our redeemer Jesus Christ went out of the holy sepulchre /it was not opened in any place: neither did it crack . . . And later an angel went to open the sepulchre . . . ”

As regards the apparitions of the risen Christ, we note a certain delicacy on the part of the author with regard to the Blessed Virgin: it is to her that the Savior first appeared, and it is in asking for permission to go and console the Apostles and his disciples that he takes leave of her:

(fol. 69-70) . . . After our Lord had risen *he went to console first his gentle mother the precious queen holy Mary* who kneeling in her place of seclusion was very sad, *waiting for the resurrection of her precious son: as she knew very well that he would rise from the dead.* And when our redeemer, already wanted to enter there where his most holy mother was, the angel, Saint Gabriel, entered first very promptly and went to greet the queen of heaven: And he said to her. “*Regina coeli laetare etc. . . . Then the son of God went in to console his precious and blessed mother: who knelt at his feet/*with very great gladness and joy at seeing her most holy and blessed son: who raised her up and both were in that holy cell speaking and consoling each other and rejoicing with admirable gladness. Our redeemer *Jesus Christ said to his most holy and blessed mother: “Very beloved mother of mine: my disciples and apostles are very distressed by my death: therefore it is good that I go to console them: for which reason I ask your permission to go: remain in peace.” His most holy and glorious mother replied, “Son of my womb, let it be as you say: go to console them since they are sad and with them your beloved disciple/Mary Magdalene . . . ”*

Therefore, the Mother of God knew that Jesus’ death on the cross was not the end. She alone, despite everything, had kept the faith during those days of sadness. That is why, for more than twelve centuries, the Church has dedicated Saturday to



her.<sup>1</sup> And so, we note once again the insistence of the author in repeating the titles which recommend the Virgin Mary to our veneration: "his most holy mother," "his most holy and glorious mother," "his most holy and blessed mother," "his precious and blessed mother," "precious queen of heaven," "his gentle mother and precious queen saint Mary," finally from the lips of the Savior himself: "Very beloved mother of mine."

On the occasion of the Ascension of Christ to heaven, the Manual places on the lips of the Divine Master some words addressed to his Mother. Long before Paul VI, these words express a doctrine contained in a proclamation made by that Pope: "Mary, Mother of the Church," Mother of the shepherds as well as of the simple faithful. We, in fact, encounter this prayerfully imagined scene:

(fol. 73b) . . . *Sermon XVI on the sixth Article on the humanity. . . . the gentle mother and queen of heaven the ever virgin holy Mary was very sad: because her precious son was leaving her in this world. . . . Our gentle and loving redeemer Jesus Christ said to her, "My most gentle mother! if I were to take you with me to heaven now, who would take care of my beloved disciples: who would comfort them: and who would strengthen them in this life? So, my precious mother, it is very good for you to remain here; and for this I leave you here with my beloved disciples: because you stay in my place: and you have to comfort them and strengthen them, because they will go through many and very great trials.*

The Divine Master repeats more or less the same words to his Apostles, to show how important he considers the function he has assigned to his Holy Mother:

(fol. 73b-74) . . . He then said to his disciples, "My beloved sons: you see here my gentle mother, queen of heaven, whom I leave to you so that you may be given comfort and strength by her whom I

<sup>1</sup> See C. Binder, *Thesis in Passione Domini fidem Ecclesiae in beatissima Virgine sola remansisse, juxta doctrinam Medii Aevi et recentioris aetatis*, in *MEcl* (Acta Congressus Mariologici-Mariani in civitate Lourdes, anno 1958, celebrati), III (Roma: Academia Mariana Internationalis, 1959) 389-488.

*leave in my place when you have troubles and hardships.*" And with this our great king and Lord ascended into heaven.

Thus, the most blessed Virgin is not in any manner presented as a substitute for the hierarchy instituted by her Divine Son. She is associated by Him with the work of Salvation, in such a way that her maternal care heaps graces on the shepherds as well as the simple faithful, *and this is done by the very authority with which she was invested from on High* ("you stay in my place"). In short, the Holy Virgin is above the Shepherds, because she is inserted into the Hypostatic Order itself.

Concerning the Ascension and the Mother of God, we note yet another reference included in the Manual:

(fol. 74b) . . . and in this manner they all departed (the heavenly citizens) in his company, playing music for the son of God and the virgin Mary, until they entered with him into his royal abode in heaven . . .

Henceforth and for all eternity, the Word of God is at one and the same time the Son of the Father and of the most Blessed Virgin Mary. Better yet, on the day of the Ascension, it is the humanity he assumed in the most pure womb of the Virgin of Nazareth which is the object of the homage rendered by the choirs of angels, since the Word had never left the bosom of the Father!

When the editors of the Manual arrived at the moral question of "how to preserve virginity," they once more made use of the doctrine of the virginal conception and birth:

(fol. 122b-123) . . . *Sermon xxxi on how to keep virginity* . . . Know my beloved brothers . . . that our redeemer Jesus Christ son of God almighty came to this world, and in it he searched for, chose, *and took for mother the most gentle and sacred holy queen of heaven and sovereign virgin Mary: who remained ever virgin.* . . . it is good to know, in order to show to us, . . . how greatly he loves virginity, and how he loves and holds in high regard an untarnished and good life.

In the same *Sermon xxxi*, the Manual noted that the saints followed the example of the virginity of the Savior and of "his most holy and most precious mother" (fol. 124).

Next, we come upon *Sermon xi on the angelic salutation*, which forms the part of the Manual that is richest in material concerning Marian devotion. Here we learn at first that "our great King and Lord Jesus Christ" appointed "his most gentle mother and queen of great esteem" as the universal dispenser of grace, and that the most effective prayer for touching her heart is the *Ave Maria*:

(fol. 153b) . . . *When we want the gentle mother of God and most precious queen to favor us, we get on our knees in reverence to her and we offer her this angelic salutation of the Ave Maria, and she listens with good will to our supplication and then gives us grace. Because, it must be known that our great king and Lord Jesus Christ confided his divine grace and help to his most gentle mother and queen of great esteem, so that she might give and distribute it to us sinners. Therefore, it is proper that we always kneel in reverence to the queen of heaven, and that we greet her with this angelic salutation, saying: Ave Maria.*

A few pages further on, we find the same doctrine concerning the Angelic Salutation, but stated in a less expressive form:

(fol. 155b) . . . *So it is good for us always to look for grace and ask it of our Lord God and of his gentle and sacred mother, the most precious queen, so that she speaks for us. For that reason, we say to the mother of God the following words: "Sancta Maria virgo mater dei ora pro nobis peccatoribus. Amen." Which means "Holy Mary, ever virgin, glorious and most pure mother of our loving God, pray for us sinners. Amen."*

In the formula given for the second part of the *Ave Maria*, it seems important to note two things: 1) this second part is shorter than the one used today; and 2) for the first time, in Mexico, we find inserted between "Maria" and "Mater Dei" the word "virgo" (*Sancta Maria virgo Mater Dei*). Until the end of the sixteenth century, this was in common usage.

As has already been pointed out, after teaching that Our Lord appointed "his most gentle mother and queen of great esteem" as universal dispenser of his grace, the Manual immediately endeavors to explain the reason: the Most Holy Virgin is mediatrix of all graces, because she was full of grace from the first moment of her conception. She is so "full of grace" that we address ourselves to Her to obtain "some small portion of grace":

(fol. 153b-154) . . . "*Ave Maria gratia plena dominus tecum.*" *The gentle virgin Mary queen of heaven was very full of grace because our great king and Lord God had filled her. . . . she greatly surpassed all the saints, and this was so because she was and is full of grace, because our great king and Lord God filled her. And, therefore, when the angel greeted her he said to her "Gratia plena" which means "You are full of grace." Let us greet her ourselves, so that she may see fit to give us some small portion of grace.*

This last part seems to reflect the teaching of certain theologians concerning "the plenitude of grace of superabundance" in the Mother of God.<sup>2</sup> Let us note the originality of the explanation of "*benedicta tu in mulieribus.*" For, in our Manual, the "queen of heaven" is not blessed among women merely because of her Divine Maternity, she is blessed also because of her spiritual Maternity:

(fol. 154b) . . . *Benedicta tu in mulieribus. She was filled [with grace] and is greatly worthy of being blessed and praised: for she was made mother of God and of sinners . . .*

We do not find anywhere the name "New Eve" applied to the Holy Virgin, but the doctrine of the "recapitulation," taught by the Apostolic Fathers, is delicately evoked:

(fol. 154b) . . . The first woman Eve closed heaven for us through the sin she committed, *and the mother of our God, on the con-*

<sup>2</sup> See R. Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., *La Mère du Sauveur et notre vie intérieure*, (Paris: Ed. du Cerf, 1954) 34.

*trary, opened up heaven for us that we may enter there. Therefore, she is greatly blessed.*

The most expressive passage inviting one to Marian devotion is found on folios 155b and 156; it is the continuation of *Sermon xi on the Angelic Salutation*:

(fol. 155b-156) . . . The queen of heaven, holy Mary, was worthy to become our *advocate and intercessor* forever in heaven in the presence of her most gentle and precious son in heaven above. Because *if she did not intercede for us, our great Lord Jesus Christ would have destroyed us a long time ago for our evil life. But since his blessed mother the queen of heaven always prays for us, therefore, the Lord God looks upon us with merciful eyes and does great mercies for us: because he obeys his most precious mother, and he bows down to her and defers to her. For this, we need to serve and please our advocate and intercessor, our appeaser and mender, the gentle and most precious mother of the king of heaven and our God*, that she may always pray and intercede for us to her precious son. . . .

Clearly, it is the "gentle and precious mother of the King of Heaven" who is charged with pleading on our behalf ("advocate") and with interceding for us. It is her intervention which prevents the Justice of God from weighing down on our world of sin ("apladora"). It is in our interest to turn to Her; He does not know how to refuse her anything ("he obeys his most precious mother").<sup>3</sup>

This recourse should be daily, and we could find no better means than the daily recitation of the Rosary; it is the prayer most pleasing to the Mother of God:

<sup>3</sup> See M.-R. Vernet, O.P., *La Vierge à Pellevoisin, La Miséricorde et la gloire de Dieu au coeur d'une Mère. Lecture théologique et spirituelle des documents* (Paris: Téqui, 1978) 103-104. In Pellevoisin Our Lady declared: "*Je suis toute miséricordieuse et maîtresse de mon Fils.*" Fr. Vernet comments on those last words in the following way: "A première vue, cette parole pourrait nous paraître un peu forte : . . . Mais dans l'enseignement des Papes nous trouvons une expression aussi hardie. Ainsi Pie VII déclare: 'les prières des autres habitants du ciel font appel, il est vrai, à la bienveillance divine, celles de Marie re-

(fol. 156) . . . And we must always pray the prayer and salutation which is the *Ave Maria* that we have mentioned; *and each one of you must bring a Rosary with beads, and you must always pray it every day at least once in the morning or in the evening. Because with this, the most gentle mother of our God is very much served, honored and revered, and greatly praised; if it is prayed with one's whole heart . . .*

We can see that what is spoken of here is not a mere mechanical recitation of the Rosary; one must put one's whole heart into it: "de todo corazon."

Such practice of Marian devotion is one of the surest means of union with the Good Lord, and we cannot gauge its impact on the mystical body of Christ.<sup>4</sup> Hence, we draw attention, in particular, to the final dedication listed in the Manual: "To the glory and praise of our redeemer Jesus/ *Christ and of his holy mother!* . . ." Once again, it is sufficient to remark that we do not have here merely a routine formula. But even if that were the case, the repetition of such formulas would only serve to instill more profoundly the doctrine presented. On the whole, this Manual, put together by a team of Dominicans and printed in 1548, is a genuine treasure.

## CONCLUSION

When we compare the manuals of Catechesis used in six-

*posent en plus sur un droit maternel: c'est pourquoi s'approchant du trône de son divin Fils, comme Avocate elle demande, comme Servante elle prie, et comme Mère elle commande.* (Advocata petit, Ancilla orat, Mater imperat).' C'est du reste en ce sens qu'Estelle a bien précisé au Père Hugon *qu'il s'agissait de l'influence efficace d'une Mère sur le Coeur de son Fils*: 'Cela veut dire que la sainte Vierge en suppliant son Fils . . . obtient tout de lui et que *son Fils, dans son amour, ne peut rien lui refuser.* . . .' Le Pape Pie IX avait écrit dans le même sens: 'Marie est toute-puissante auprès de Celui qu'elle a enfanté,' et 'il n'est rien qu'elle ne puisse obtenir de lui.' " (pp. 103-104). See also J.M. Salgado, *Incidence de la Royauté de la Sainte Vierge Marie sur l'exercice de sa Maternité spirituelle*, in *Div*, fasc. II (1972) 207-211.

<sup>4</sup> See H. Petitot, *Introduction à la sainteté* (Paris: Ed. du Cerf, 1934), 71, 82-83.

teenth-century Latin America, Spain, France and Italy, we are obliged to claim that the Latin American and the Spanish ones are by far the best—both in the wealth of doctrine concerning Our Blessed Mother and in the expression of that doctrine. A theologian who teaches in Rome offered this evident explanation; he simply recalled that the sixteenth century was the “Golden Age” for theology in Spain. This does not indicate that the catechetical handbooks used in France and Italy are poorly done. By no means! They also express, although in a more sober way, the traditional Faith which the Church had in Mary as Mother of God, Mother of the Church, and our Spiritual Mother. All these manuals proclaim the power of Her intercession and the tenderness of Her love for each one of us.

JEAN-MARIE SALGADO, O.M.I.  
*B.P. 681*

*Port-au-Prince*  
*Haiti, West Indies*