

2-9-1968

Profile of Marian Devotion on the Parochial Level

Joseph E. Manton

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian_studies



Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Manton, Joseph E. (1968) "Profile of Marian Devotion on the Parochial Level," *Marian Studies*: Vol. 19, Article 7, Pages 41-48.

Available at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian_studies/vol19/iss1/7

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Marian Library Publications at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Marian Studies by an authorized editor of eCommons. For more information, please contact mschlangen1@udayton.edu, ecommons@udayton.edu.

PROFILE OF MARIAN DEVOTION ON THE PAROCHIAL LEVEL

Those words "parochial level" should indicate the unpretentious purpose of this talk. It is addressed not to those who have written or will write learned papers for the Society's periodical, *Marian Studies*, but to the ordinary ecclesiastical G.I. like myself. In fact, after having read some of those erudite documents with their centipede footnotes, I feel, in even daring to stand here, like a window-cleaner on the fortieth story of the Empire State, leaning in and lecturing the Board of Directors of Standard Oil how to run the company.

But at least on this plebeian plane you will hear nothing of charisma or kerygma, of metanoia or milieu, of theotokos or parthenos, or even of maximal or minimal Mariologists. In the ordinary parish these words would raise an uneasy eyebrow. Which reminds me to admit that I can speak with authority (as one of our ushers would have it) only about one particular parish, although that particular wayside shrine of Our Lady in the inner city of Boston does happen to be a Basilica. However, for the last six months I have dutifully and sometimes even deviously endeavored to entice from other novena directors and from interested clergy in general the situation in their distant territory. I am pained to report that the most frequent response has been a shrug. At rare times this was supplemented with pointed views or visionary vagaries and occasionally even pious venom.

I have also tried to monitor the Catholic press across the spectrum that extends from *The Wanderer* to *The National Catholic Reporter* for suggestive straws in the Marian wind, but this has been an admittedly haphazard coverage that no clipping bureau would tolerate. At any rate, my own over-all impression from reading papers and asking people is that public devotion to Our Lady, if measured by perpetual novenas, Octo-

ber Devotions, May Processions and the like, has definitely deteriorated.

You may retort that it needs no ghost from the tomb to tell us this. What we should like to know is why. One possible reason, it seems to me, is that since very few of the laity have read the constitutions of the recent Council, they get their information from the second or third pressings of the commentators, and especially from random religious pieces in the secular press. The upshot of this is that the average layman has a vague idea that Our Lady has been downgraded in importance by the Church.

Maybe he has read that according to the Dutch Catechism, Mary did not know her Son was divine till the Resurrection. Maybe he has heard that in the English Canon they have omitted the words, "Mother of God," though it is still in the "Deliver us, O Lord." Maybe he has listened to his teen-agers come home from C.C.D. with the debunking news that the Annunciation never really happened; it is just a literary form. Maybe he has seen an account of a West Coast workshop where the presiding priest announced, "We have affection for Mary but no cult."

Or perhaps he has listened to some "liberal" Catholics who feel that if we remove Mary's statues from our parish churches and eliminate references to her in our prayer-books we shall help the holy cause of ecumenism. The idea there seems to be that if we yield our claims on some of the territory called Marian Doctrine, it will be a small price to pay for holding on to more valuable dogmatic land.

But you don't horse-trade in a realm as sacred as religion. In order to make friends, can we turn away from our Mother? Do we give her the back of our hand in order to stretch out the other hand in ecumenical greeting? I am afraid that all we can do about Marian dogma is patiently to explain it. We cannot deny it, we cannot change it. A convinced Catholic can say only, "Love me, love my dogma." In this area it may be

noted that Pope Paul probably set back ecumenism twenty years when he went to Fatima. And then he went to Ephesus.

Or perhaps the more sophisticated Catholic parishioner has seen some weird advertisements about new medals or scapulars or light-in-the-dark pictures, or has heard of recent breathtaking apparitions of Our Lady. And he winces. But here we have to make the old distinction. All popular devotion needs careful watching and close pruning, but if shoots of superstition and sentimental excesses deserve the shears, valid devotion merits protection and encouragement.

There was no downgrading of Mary at Vatican II. It is true that the bishops by a narrow margin voted not to have a separate constitution on Mary, but they did not hesitate in the Constitution on the Church to set forth in language as large and clear as though it were painted on a cliff

1. That Mary was the Mother of God, and
2. That, therefore, she was above all other creatures.

Does this sound like downgrading?

The Council also noted that churches not in union with the Holy See, like the so-called Oriental Orthodox, have always paid great veneration to Mary, and that this was basis for the hope that through her intercession the yearned-for unity might be established before long. Pope Pius XII was fond of saying (if I may interject a local Redemptorist commercial) that the picture of Our Mother of Perpetual Help, because it had its origin and style from the East but had won such popularity in the West, could well be the bridge on which the Church of the East and the Church of the West might one day meet within the welcoming arms of the Mother of God. Does this sound like downgrading the position or the influence of Mary?

I wonder, too, if the average parishioner who hears that Mary's status is being whittled down, knows that on the final day of the Council's Third Session, Pope Paul VI had the Sistine Choir take its place in St. Peter's a half hour early and set the

lofty arches ringing with hymns in honor of Our Lady? Or that on the same day as co-celebrants with himself of the Mass he chose the bishops from Mary's famous shrines, like Lourdes and Fatima and Guadalupe? Having thus acted with all the subtlety of a steam-roller, did he not in the very last Mass startle all, shock some, and delight others by hailing Mary as "Mother of the Church?" Was this downgrading?

However, on the parish level people may hear about some curate standing in the pulpit on Sunday morning scornfully ripping a rosary to shreds and dramatically tossing it into the center aisle. I have met one young priest who tolerated the Pastor saying the beads with the people after Mass in October, but who stipulated, "Please don't ask *me* to go through the agony of that monotonous repetition!" I remember another curate who looked down on me with Alpine condescension and wanted to know when I was going to get rid of "that medieval ornament that some of you Orders drape round your cincture."

It is true that in some parts of the country Bible Vigils are supplanting the rosary at wakes, but I have also heard of instances where the people far prefer the beads. After all, the Our Father and the Hail Mary (first part) are lifted right out of the Bible, and thirteen of the fifteen mysteries of the rosary are scenes from Scripture. A well-said rosary is a meditation based on the Bible.

How is it that the beads seem to be losing ground? One reason might be that in the days when the Mass was the private preserve of the priest, who said it in almost autocratic solitary grandeur, the people naturally turned to the beads. Now, in this brave new day of dialogue and participation, the beads are finding their level, admittedly far below the Mass, as a private devotion.

But as a private devotion all the recent Popes have canonized the beads. Did not Pope Paul VI say, "We ardently desire that Mary be more fervently invoked during October by the pious

rite of the rosary?" And he added that the recent Council, "urges the Church's children to value highly the practices directed to Mary and approved over the centuries by the magisterium."

So, where do you go for your evaluation of the beads, to some curate in East Cupcake, West Virginia, who at the moment seems to be yearning more for publicity than for Paradise, or to the Supreme Pontiff? If parochial devotion to Mary, as exemplified by the rosary, is hurting, it is certainly not the result of any official frown from the top. It is from the random shots of sophisticated snipers on the sidelines. True, one or the other feast of Our Lady has been reduced in rank to only a commemoration. To this we humble accede; the Church knows best. Then there is the matter of contemporary Marian art. I doubt if some of those primitive statues of the Virgin, gaunt and angular like the art of the catacombs processed through the kindergarten, help elevate Our Lady's image in the eye of the ordinary parishioner. And, of course, there are hints about de-emphasizing devotion to Mary and diluting of her importance in magazines like *Time*. But we all know the viewpoint of *Time*. It is the opposite of eternity.

It is not the whole truth to say, for example, that weekly novenas in honor of Mary are not as well attended as they used to be. It seems to me that no devotions are as well attended as they used to be; not novenas to St. Anne, or to St. Joseph, or to St. Francis Xavier. Not missions or parish retreats, or closed week-end retreats. The Dow Jones average is down all along the spiritual line, except in Mass and Communions.

A public novena used to have two towering advantages over the regular daily Mass. The first was that you could attend a novena in the afternoon or the evening. You did not have to be an "early Christian" and get up at a sacrificial hour. Now, like the novena, weekday Masses are held at noon, at twilight dim, and after dinner. This is especially true during Advent and Lent, and during May and October.

Secondly, the real appeal of the novena used to be the participation of the congregation. The people said the prayers, the people sang the hymns, the people made the novena. The Mass, by contrast, was the silent church. The priest was only a distant colored dot who murmured a language they could not understand, in a tone they could not hear, and with his face turned in the opposite direction. The people were puppets who silently rose and sat and knelt at the end of invisible liturgical strings.

But now the Mass offers everything that the novena used to monopolize. Parishioners don't just hear Mass or "go to" Mass; they take part in it. And if parishioners get this sense of active participation on Sunday, perhaps they feel less need for it on Monday or Wednesday or whenever novena day is.

Weekly novenas, too, are like governments, in that they seem to prosper best on a war-time economy. At least that was the case in our neck of the woods during the Second World War, and to some extent during the Korean conflict. On the other hand, Vietnam seems to have moved the needle on the attendance dial scarcely a hair. During the Second World War, relatives filled the pews (not to forget girlfriends) praying for the boys who were away. For five years afterward, the girls brought the boys, to give thanks and to pray for a special intention—the girl's special intention being the boy. About ten years ago, I remember running an ad in the diocesan paper, "Do we need another war to bring us back to the Novena?" Now we have one, complete with flame-throwers and napalm, and it does not seem to matter.

My own surmise is that in the wake of the Council (though not necessarily because of it) there has been a general blurring of the sharp line of one true faith, partly induced by a compromising ecumenism; and also a general weakening of morals, partly due to "the pill" and to the delay in a final decision on birth control; and that this loss in faith and morals has left people spiritually flabby and anemic, at least in comparison

with their fathers and mothers, so that they are not so willing to make the sacrifice of, for example, attending a weekly novena.

Do they love Mary less? Perhaps not, but certainly the obstacles to a weekly novena are far more. Take so prosaic a matter as parking. The Church was originally founded on a rock; the suburban parish is founded on a parking lot. But the inner-city church has no facilities for parking except along the street; and what do you tell the novena-goer whose car has been stripped or even stolen? I have faced them, and I wish I knew.

Those who used to come by bus or trolley find that the fare has now soared as high as the trolley pole. Twenty-five years ago you could come from a neighboring town by trolley and bus to Boston and return for twenty cents. Now the whole trip costs at least eighty. Five years ago you could walk any street in our parish at any time of the night without the thought of danger. Now, once it grows dark, you think twice. Handbag snatching is an everyday and especially an every night occurrence. If novenas are dying, don't lay all the blame at the feet of the new trends in theology. Küng, Congar, Schillebeeckx may be far less to blame than deteriorated neighborhoods and prowling thieves.

Another way in which the grubby world of reality affects Marian devotions in a parish is the modern boob-tube or the "haunted fishtank" of television. When a man can get up from his dinner, sink into a comfortable chair with a can of beer at his elbow, and a two-hour movie right before his eyes, it will take an extraordinary spiritual derrick to lift him out and send him off to the October Devotions or the Miraculous Medal Novena. It is not hard to put TV before B.V., television before the Blessed Virgin. The golden faith of yesteryear did not have to fight the gilded temptations of today or tonight.

Even the lovely month of May, traditionally dedicated to Mary, has a small lobby lined up against it. At the moment

the movement is only a ripple on the Marian sea but there are depths beneath it that might make it swell. Their valid premise is that Mary is nothing without Christ, as the beauty of the sunset could not exist without the sun. To underline Mary's relation to Christ even in the church calendar, they would change Mary's month from May to December. Liturgically this would fit Our Lady snugly into the season of Advent. Day by day we would follow her along the Bethlehem Road to the Birth of Christ.

In every parish there are some whose devotion to Mary is mature and (as the Council would have it) rooted in Scripture, the Fathers of the Church, and the Liturgy. But there are many more whose devotion is childlike and who are attracted more to sacramentals, apparitions and shrines. There is a place in the pews for both, because the colored fountains of rosary and litany and medal and shrine rise from the deep well of the basic truth that Mary is the influential Mother of God.

These days the Church itself is in flux and turmoil. It makes me think of a huge retreat house I saw being built last Fall in New Jersey. They were tearing down the old wooden building, and some of the rubble was still there, ready to be carted away. Right next to it were neat loads of new buff bricks about to rise in impressive walls. And in the center of it all, at the heart of a round courtyard, stood a statue of Our Lady. They were actually building right around her, and she looked down serenely on the departure of the old and its replacement by the new. She knew that the modern building would house the same Lord, Her Son, and its clients would still salute Her, His Mother.

REV. JOSEPH E. MANTON, C.S.S.R.

*Mission Church
Boston, Mass.*