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MARY AS THE MODEL OF FAITHFUL LOVE FOR FAMILIES, SPOUSES, AND CONSECRATED PERSONS

Robert L. Fastiggi, PhD

This essay will explore Mary as the exemplar of holiness for the faithful in the various states of life. In a special way, it will draw upon the insights of St. John Paul II (1920–2005).

In discussing the Church as “holy,” the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* points to Mary as the exemplar of holiness:

But while in the most Blessed Virgin the Church has already reached that perfection whereby she exists without spot or wrinkle, the faithful still strive to conquer sin and increase in holiness and so they turn their eyes to Mary: in her, the Church is already the “all-holy.”¹

The *Catechism* recognizes Mary as the exemplar or model of holiness in the Church. Vatican II, in *Lumen gentium*, 61, speaks of Mary as “our Mother in the order of grace” (*mater*

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC], 829.

nobis in ordine gratiae).² The “order of grace” is also the order of holiness because we become holy through the grace of God, which is a “participation in the divine nature” (1 Pet 1:4). This essay will explore Mary as the exemplar of holiness for the faithful in the various states of life. In a special way, it will draw upon the insights of St. John Paul II (1920-2005).

John Paul II has been rightly called “Mary’s Pope.”³ It is not by accident that a Roman Pontiff so devoted to the Mother of God should also be committed in a special way to the dignity of women. The apostolic letter *Mulieris dignitatem* [MD] was issued on August 15, 1988, the Solemnity of Mary’s Assumption, at the closure of the Marian Year. This special year, dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, was inaugurated on the Solemnity of the Annunciation, March 25, 1987, by means of John Paul II’s encyclical *Redemptoris Mater* [RM].

It is no secret that Mary played a special role in John Paul II’s pontificate (1978-2005). His papal motto, *Totus tuus* (entirely yours), comes from the work *True Devotion to Mary*, by St. Louis-Marie Grignion de Montfort (1673-1716), one of the most important Marian theologians in Catholic history. The phrase *totus tuus* appears in several places in Montfort’s work. In explaining how complete consecration to Mary is the most perfect consecration to Jesus, Montfort writes that true devotion to Mary “consists in giving oneself entirely to Mary in order to

² See Heinrich Denzinger and Peter Hünermann, eds. *Compendium of Creed, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*, 43rd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012) [henceforth D-H], no. 4176.

³ Cf. Fr. Antoine Nacheff, *Mary’s Pope: John Paul II, Mary and the Church since Vatican II* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 2000). The Foreword is by James Cardinal Hickey.

belong entirely to Jesus through her.”⁴ As can be seen, true devotion to Mary is intended to lead one closer to Jesus, her Son. This is even more clearly expressed in another passage of *True Devotion* that provides this short prayer of consecration: “I am all yours; and all that I have is yours, O dear Jesus, through Mary, your holy Mother.”⁵ In *Redemptoris Mater*, John Paul II points to St. Louis Marie Grignion as one “who proposes consecration to Christ through the hands of Mary, as an effective means for Christians to live faithfully their baptismal commitments.”⁶

In many ways, the Blessed Virgin Mary was at the heart of John Paul II’s pontificate. He himself believed that Mary provided him with special protection from the bullet of the would-be-assassin, Mehmet Ali Agca, on May 13, 1981, the Feast of Our Lady of Fatima. This bullet was later set in the Crown of Our Lady at Fatima in 1994. In his final encyclical, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (2003), John Paul II exhorted the faithful to enter into Eucharistic contemplation through the “School of Mary.”⁷

In what follows, I will try to show the profound link between the dignity of women and the Blessed Virgin Mary in John Paul II’s thought. In a special way, I will focus on Mary as the

⁴ St. Louis de Monfort, *True Devotion to Mary* (art. 121), in *God Alone: The Collected Writings of St. Louis de Monfort*, trans. and ed. J. Patrick Gaffney, SMM et. al. (Bay Shore, NY: Monfort Publications, 1988), 327.

⁵ *Ibid.*, art. 233, in *God Alone*, 364; see fn. 415 in *God Alone*, 393. This formula is taken from St. Bonaventure, *Psalm majus, cant. Ad instar illius Moisis: “Tuus totus ego sum, et omnia mea tua sunt.”*

⁶ See John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater* (1987), no. 48.

⁷ See *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (2003), chap. 6, nos. 53-58.

exemplar of faithful love, not only for consecrated virgins but also for spouses, mothers, and the Church herself.

I. Mary is the Exemplar of Faithful, Human Love: Theological Foundations.

John Paul II was acutely aware of the centrality of Mary to the Christian faith. In this he was building on the insight of his predecessor, Paul VI, who, in a homily given in 1970 at the Marian shrine of Our Lady of Bonaria in Cagliari, Sardinia, stated: “If we want to be Christian, we must also be Marian, that is we must recognize the essential, vital, providential bond which unites Our Lady with Jesus and which opens to us the way that leads us to him.”⁸ In a similar way, John Paul recognized “the exceptional link between this ‘woman’ and the whole human family.”⁹ This exceptional link helps to explain why Mary is the exemplar of faithful love. The following theological foundations are also important:

A. Mary expresses the finality of human existence.

Mary embodies the finality of human existence realized “*in the supernatural elevation to union with God* in Jesus Christ which determines the ultimate finality of the existence of every person both on earth and in eternity” (MD, 4). Mary “is the representative and the archetype of the whole human race: *she represents the humanity* which belongs to all human beings, both men and woman” (MD, 2; emphasis in original). This point corresponds to the insight of St. Thomas Aquinas: “Through the Annunciation, the consent of the Virgin was awaited in the name

⁸ *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 62 (1970): 300-301.

⁹ See *Mulieris dignitatem* [MD], 2 and *Redemptoris Mater* [RM], 7-11.

of all human nature.”¹⁰ Mary is she “who did so ennoble human nature that its Creator did not disdain to become its creature” (Dante: *Paradiso*, 33:4-6: *tu se’ colei che l’umana natura nobilitasti sì, che l’ suo fattore non disdegnò di farsi sua fattura*).¹¹

B. Mary’s union with God is due to grace.

Mary’s intimate union with God is a result of “pure grace,” but “through her response of faith Mary exercises her free will and thus fully shares with her personal and feminine ‘I’ in the event of the Incarnation” (MD, 4). Mary thus becomes the supreme example of human nature transformed by grace but fully free. According to Catholic theology, grace does not take away human freedom but perfects it.¹² Mary is the most illustrious example of this principle, especially in light of Luke 1:28, where Mary is greeted by the angel as “full of grace” (*kecharitoméne*). In Greek, *kecharitoméne* means one who has been and continues to be “favored” or “graced” by God (alternate translations could be “completely graced” or “thoroughly graced”). As Fr. Settimio M. Manelli, FI, observes:

... [*kecharitoméne*] is a perfect passive participle, translated as full of grace, or as fore-loved, privileged, gratified. As perfect passive participle, the Greek word means, “to be enriched by grace in a stable, lasting way.” In fact, the Greek perfect denotes an action completed in the past whose effects endure. Hence, the angel greets Mary by

¹⁰ *Summa theologica* III, q.30 a. 1 (my translation).

¹¹ Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Comedia* (Florence, Italy: Editrice Adriano Salani, 1938), 690 (my translation).

¹² This insight is most associated with St. Thomas Aquinas’s Latin saying, viz., *gratia non tollit naturam sed perficit* (*Summa theologiae*, I, quest. 1, art. 8).

announcing that she has been enriched by grace in the past and that the effects of this gift remain. Without doubt this is a singular form of address. No one else in the Bible was ever greeted thus. Only Mary has been so addressed, and this in the moment when she was about to accomplish the “fullness of time,” to realize the prophecies of old, and when the Word of God stood ready to take of her our human nature.”¹³

In Catholic theology Mary’s fullness of grace at the Annunciation reflects her Immaculate Conception, when she was conceived in the redeemed state free from all stain of original sin. From the time of her conception, Mary was filled with such a plenitude of grace that she was elevated above all other creatures. Bl. Pius IX testifies to this in his 1854 Bull *Ineffabilis Deus*, proclaiming the dogma of Mary’s Immaculate Conception:

God ineffable ... from the beginning and before the ages chose and ordained a mother for his Only-begotten Son, from whom he would become incarnate and be born in the blessed fullness of time. And God honored her above all other creatures with such love that in her alone he was pleased with a most singular benevolence. Therefore, he wonderfully filled her, far more than all the angels and saints, with an abundance of all the heavenly gifts taken from the treasury of his divinity. In this way, she, being always and absolutely free from every stain of sin, completely beautiful and perfect, would possess such a plenitude of innocence and sanctity that, under God, none greater could be known and, apart from God, no mind could ever succeed in comprehending.¹⁴

¹³ Fr. Settimio M. Manelli, FI, “The Virgin Mary in the New Testament,” in *Mariology: A Guide for Priests, Deacons, Seminarians, and Consecrated Persons*, ed. Mark Miravalle (Goleta, CA: Queenship Publishing, 2007), 75.

¹⁴ D-H, 2800.

C. Mary's *fiat* is the gift of herself.

Mary gives herself totally to God in her *fiat* at the Annunciation. She makes a sincere gift of herself to God (MD, 4). Mary “discovers herself ‘by means of a sincere gift of self’” (MD, 11). By her total gift of herself to God in love and service (cf. MD, 5), Mary becomes the exemplar of human love as self-donation and interpersonal communion (cf. MD, 7). Mary, therefore, expresses perfectly the teaching of Vatican II: namely, that human beings truly find themselves only when they make a sincere gift of themselves (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, 24).

D. Mary is the exemplar of holiness.

John Paul II teaches that Mary holds first place in “the hierarchy of holiness” (MD, 27). She embodies the perfection of human virtue, grace and love, and thus becomes an eschatological sign of hope for the Church (MD, 27; cf. Vatican II, *Lumen gentium*, 65). This was the teaching of Dante. In speaking of Mary, he writes: “In thee is compassion; in thee, mercy; in thee, magnificence; in thee is assembled everything in the creature there is of goodness: *In te misericordia, in te pietate, in te magnificenza, in te s’aduna quantunque in creatura è di bontate*”¹⁵

II. Mary is the Exemplar of Faithful Love for Virgins (MD, 7, 20-21).

We now turn to Mary as the exemplar of faithful love for the various states of life. In a preeminent way, Mary is the exemplar of faithful love for virgins. John Paul II teaches that the consecration of virgins is not only an eschatological sign but also an expression of the “spousal gift” of oneself to Christ (MD, 20).

¹⁵ *Paradiso*, 33:19:21 (my translation).

Virgins also embody motherhood “according to the Spirit” (MD, 21), and they find in Mary an exemplar of virginal, spousal love and spiritual motherhood, since Mary is the spiritual mother of all Christians. Mary represents the perfect virginal love by “her total self-giving to God in virginity” (RM, 39).

III. Mary is the Exemplar of Faithful Love for Spouses.

Mary’s consent to be the Mother of God “is guided by the spousal love, the love which totally ‘consecrates’ a human being to God” (MD, 39). Going back to the Fathers of the Church (e.g., St. Ephrem the Syrian [c. 306-373] and St. Gregory Nazianzus [c. 329-390]), there is a long tradition of understanding Mary as the “spouse of God” in a mystical, spiritual sense.¹⁶ In his prayer for the Marian Year, John Paul II says of Mary: “The Holy Spirit loved you as his mystical spouse.” In her mystical espousal to God, Mary gives herself totally in faithful love. She said yes to all God asked of her, including the sword that would pierce her heart (cf. Lk 2:35) and the Passion of her Son (MD, 19). Mary was also united to St. Joseph, the just man, “by a bond of marital and virginal love.”¹⁷

Mary and St. Joseph shared a mutual spiritual love in service to the call God gave them. According to St. Augustine, Mary’s marriage to Joseph was marked by the three goods of marriage: “offspring, fidelity and sacrament.”¹⁸ As one who embodies

¹⁶ See Luigi Gambero, SM, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church*, trans. Thomas Buffer (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), 117-118, 167, 296-297, 300-301, 338; cf. Michael O’Carroll, CSSp, *Theotokos: A Theological Encyclopedia of the Blessed Virgin Mary* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2000), 333-334.

¹⁷ See John Paul’s apostolic exhortation *Guardian of the Redeemer* [1989], no. 20.

¹⁸ St. Augustine, *De nupt. et concup.* XI, 13; PL 44, 421.

spousal love that is total, faithful and fruitful, Mary serves as an exemplar and an advocate for spouses. Marital, spousal love is sacramental and indissoluble, and Mary serves as the model of covenantal love that is holy and faithful, even in the midst of suffering.

IV. Mary is the Exemplar of Faithful Love for Mothers.

John Paul II points to “virginity and motherhood as two particular dimensions of the fulfillment of the human personality,” and these “acquire their full meaning and value in Mary” (MD, 17). Motherhood involves “a special openness” on the part of a woman, a gift of “interior readiness to accept the child and bring it into the world” (MD, 18). Eve’s joy and wonder, expressed by the words “I have brought a man into being with the help of the Lord” (Gen 4:1), “is repeated every time a new human being comes into the world (MD, 18). Motherhood, also, according to John Paul II, “*is linked to the personal structure of the woman and to the personal dimension of the gift*” (MD, 18; emphasis in original).

Mary serves as the exemplar of motherhood because her *fiat* at the Annunciation signifies “the woman’s readiness for the gift of self and her readiness to accept a new life” (MD, 18). Mary also embodies the special dimension of motherhood as covenant, and “each and every time that *motherhood* is repeated in human history, it is always *related to the covenant* which God established with the human race through the motherhood of the Mother of God” (MD, 19; emphasis in original). As Mary made a covenant with God in saying “yes” to become the Mother of the Incarnate Word, human mothers must say “yes” to God when they discover that a new life has begun within their wombs. Mary also accepted all the self-sacrifice that motherhood entails, and she accepted this all in love.

V. Mary is the Exemplar of Faithful Love for the Church.

Mary is described as the “type” or “figure” of the Church (i.e., *Ecclesiae typus*) in *Lumen gentium*, 63. In Mary’s person, “the Church has already reached that perfection whereby she exists without spot or wrinkle (cf. Eph 5:27) (MD, 27; *Lumen gentium*, 65). Mary represents the holiness and fidelity that all members of the Church must seek. The Holy Spirit, as the soul of the Church, enables her to remain a faithful bride, even though individual members of the Church may fail in fidelity.

VI. Mary’s Mission in and for the Church has Social Applications.

John Paul II recognizes the tragic effects of sin on marriages, family life and women (MD, 9-10). As the New Eve, Mary represents the new humanity redeemed by Christ and elevated by grace (MD, 11). Mary is “our Mother in the order of grace” (*Lumen gentium*, 61). She is the exemplar of faithful love for all Christians, and she points the way to Christ, who is “Love Incarnate.”

What are the social applications of Mary as the exemplar of faithful love? According to the National Center for Health Statistics of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 10.7 percent of U.S. children were born to unmarried mothers in 1970; by 2002, this figure had gone up to 34% for all races and 68.2% for blacks.¹⁹ While many of these unwed mothers exhibit heroic virtue in raising their offspring without husbands, there is

¹⁹ Cf. *The World Almanac and Book of Facts* (New York: World Almanac Books, 2006), 181.

much empirical evidence that demonstrates the importance of marriage for the raising of children.²⁰

Much harm is done to individuals and the common good when sexual relations are separated from fidelity and marriage. The Church teaches that:

By its very nature, conjugal love requires the inviolable fidelity of the spouses. This is a consequence of the gift of themselves, which they make to each other. Love seeks to be definitive; it cannot be an arrangement “until further notice.” The “intimate union of marriage, as a mutual giving of two persons, and the good of the children, demand total fidelity from the spouses and require an unbreakable union between them.”²¹

The sexual union is an embodied expression of faithful love, and faithful love is a privileged expression of human dignity and social cohesion. The deepest expressions of human love require complete fidelity or faithfulness. This is true for consecrated virgins, spouses and mothers, and Mary, as we have seen, is the exemplar for all of these groups.

It might be objected that Mary is not a realistic model for women of today. After all, how many women are both virgins and mothers? How many women can claim to be preserved from original sin from the first instant of their conception? An exemplar, however, is more than a model. An exemplar is also an ideal, an archetype or a paradigm. Christians are called to follow the example of Jesus (cf. Jn 15:13) and to follow his path

²⁰ See W. Bradford Wilcox, *Why Marriage Matters: Twenty-Six Conclusions from the Social Sciences*, 2nd ed. (New York: Institute for American Values, 2005).

²¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1646; cf. *Gaudium et spes*, 48; see also Robert L. Fastiggi, *What the Church Teaches about Sex: God’s Plan for Human Happiness* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2009), 15, 45-56.

of sacrificial love (cf. Mk 8:34). Jesus, though, is the Incarnate Word of God. If Jesus holds Himself up as an exemplar, there should be no objection to having Mary as an exemplar of faithful love.

Mary, though, is more than a woman who lived in the past. She is a heavenly Mother, and “by her maternal charity, she cares for the brethren of her Son, who still journey on earth surrounded by dangers and difficulties” (*Lumen gentium*, 62). Mary is “our mother in the order of grace” (*Mater nobis in ordine gratiae*) (*Lumen gentium*, 61). She intercedes for us and helps us be faithful in love according to our state of life. The great Jesuit Francisco Suárez (1548-1617) explains that we should pray to Mary “so that the dignity of the intercessor may make up for our deficiency” (*ut dignitas intercessoris suppleat inopiam nostram*).²²

Conclusion

In North America and in many other places, human relations are deeply injured by failures in fidelity on the part of spouses, mothers and fathers. The world today needs Mary as an exemplar of faithful love and a heavenly intercessor. Social science can only go so far in explaining the reasons for breakdowns in commitments and the lack of fidelity on the part of spouses and parents. Most human failures can be traced to failures to love. Social ills often are spiritual in nature. This is why faith should not be separated from the public domain. Human relations are sustained by faithful love, and the witness of consecrated virgins and faithful spouses is so much needed.

²² Suarez, *De Mysteriis Vitae Christi*, 23, III. 4, in *Opera Omnia*, ed. Ludovicus Vivès, vol. XIX (Paris: 1856-1861), 336.

John Paul II understood human failure and how social evils transcend political and psychological explanations. He witnessed the evil effects of the Nazi and Communist regimes. His faith was sustained by his love for Mary who brought him closer to the Sacred Heart of her divine Son. By upholding the dignity of Mary, John Paul II upheld the dignity of women throughout the world. Mary, though, recognized that God was the one who had done “great things” for her (Lk 1: 49). But almighty God entered into human history through her free cooperation. This is why there is a woman at the center of salvation history, and the woman’s name is Mary. She was the one “who did so ennoble human nature that its Creator did not disdain to become its creature.”²³ Knowing that Mary played and continues to play such an important role in God’s plan of salvation, Christians must be at the forefront in defending the dignity of women.

At the heart of Mary’s role as the model of faithful love is her complete abandonment to the will of God. She always was docile to the will of God and continues to be the handmaid of the Lord even in heaven. In his General Audience of September 4, 1996, St. John Paul II summed up Mary’s complete abandonment to God’s will in this way:

Mary’s words at the Annunciation “I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (Lk 1:38), indicate an attitude characteristic of Jewish piety. At the beginning of the Old Covenant, Moses, in response to the Lord’s call, proclaims himself his servant (cf. Ex 4:10; 14:31). With the coming of the New Covenant, Mary also responds to God with an act of free submission and conscious

²³ Dante, *Paradiso* 33, 6.

abandonment to his will, showing her complete availability to be the “handmaid of the Lord.”²⁴

Mary is the faithful one and the model of faithful love. She serves as the model of faithful love for Christians in every state of life because fidelity is at the heart of the Christian life.

Author Biography

Dr. Robert Fastiggi, Professor of Systematic Theology, has been at Sacred Heart Major Seminary since 1999. He has taught a wide variety of courses there, including Ecclesiology, Christian Anthropology, Christology, Mariology, Moral Theology, and the Sacramental Life of the Church. He has been a member and served on the Administrative Council of the Mariological Society of America; he is the current MSA President (2014–2016).

²⁴ *L'Osservatore Romano* [Eng. ed] September 11, 1996, page 15