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THE BAPTISMAL SPIRITUALITY OF ST. LOUIS-MARIE DE MONTFORT

Rev. Frederick L. Miller, STD

St. Louis-Marie de Montfort (1673–1716) believed that Marian consecration was the perfect renewal of one’s baptismal promises. This article explores the foundations of St. Louis-Marie’s baptismal theology as grounded in the Council of Trent and the French School of spirituality of Cardinal Pierre de Bérulle (1575–1629). In a special way, the article shows how St. Louis-Marie incorporated Marian devotion into his parish missions. For St. Louis-Marie true devotion to Mary is ultimately a baptismal gift that serves communion with the Holy Trinity.

Jesus, living in Mary,
Come and live in your servants,
In the spirit of your holiness,
In the fullness of your might,
In the truth of your virtues,
In the perfection of your ways,
In the communion of your mysteries.
Subdue every hostile power
In your Spirit, for the glory of the Father.
Amen.¹

Introduction

The prayer *Jesus Living in Mary*, by Jean-Jacques Olier, the founder of the reform seminary of St. Sulpice in Paris, is a succinct summary of the baptismal spirituality that guided St. Louis-Marie de Montfort's pastoral ministry from beginning to end. Louis-Marie, as a seminarian at St. Sulpice, not only imbibed this spirituality in the theological courses he took and in the spiritual formation he received, but also sought further to sound the depths of it with the help of the Fathers of the Church. One might opine that his masterpieces, *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin* and *The Secret of Mary*, are commentaries on the mystery of Baptism and the role that she who is *full of grace* plays in the reception of the grace of Baptism.

In this essay, I shall investigate that share in the divine life that the Christian first receives in Baptism. Sanctifying grace is a supernatural quality created in the soul through which the Holy Spirit accomplishes the Christian's

¹ Hugh Gillespie, *Preparation for Total Consecration to Jesus Christ through Mary According to St. Louis de Montfort* (Bay Shore, NY: Montfort Publications, 2011), 13.

transformation in Christ with the person's free cooperation. It marks the initiation of the divine indwelling in the soul, in reality, the inchoate beginning of eternal life. St. Louis-Marie's teaching on the baptismal life developed organically from the doctrine of Jesus Christ as it reached him in Sacred Scripture and the lived Tradition of the Church. It received its particular form from the doctrine of the faith as articulated at the Council of Trent and presented in the *Roman Catechism*. St. Louis-Marie sculpted the teaching for his contemporaries with an eye on the interior life of Christ in the soul of the baptized as expounded in the French School of spirituality. For him, Mary is the model *par excellence* of the Christian living in Christ's grace.

One hundred fifty years before the definition of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, St. Louis-Marie was intrigued by the mystery of Mary's pristine holiness. He intuited that what had transpired in Mary through her Immaculate Conception analogously emerges in the soul of the Christian through Baptism—and always with Mary's maternal assistance. Jesus, who lived physically in Mary during the months of her pregnancy and continues to dwell in her through grace and charity, desires to take possession of every Christian, living through the Spirit in the soul. Hence, the prayer: "Jesus, living in Mary, come and live in your servants"

Montfort also focused on Mary's unique role in the spiritual regeneration of sinful men and women in Baptism and their transformation in Christ. As the Holy Spirit effected the Incarnation of the Word with the active cooperation of Mary, the *slave girl (doulē) of the Lord*, so they together effect the justification of the sinner through

faith and Baptism. In a wonderful synergy, they together generate the Word in the soul of the believer and nurture the development of that life. The Holy Spirit does this, of course, *in modo divino*. By God's design, Mary participates as a servant of the Lord and contributes, as I shall suggest below, by sharing her receptivity to grace with her new son or daughter in Christ. The Saint stated simply in *True Devotion to Mary* that the Blessed Virgin shares her faith with her children (no. 214). Today, many call this central theme of St. Louis-Marie's treatise on Mary her spiritual motherhood, or her *motherhood in the Holy Spirit*.

In the twentieth century, St. John Paul II grasped the magnitude of St. Louis-Marie's contribution to Mariology and Marian Spirituality in general and to the Marian teaching of the Second Vatican Council in particular. At heart always a parish priest, St. John Paul grasped with penetrating intuition the apostolic power of St. Louis-Marie's pastoral program of Marian Consecration. In his milestone encyclical *Redemptoris Mater* (Mother of the Redeemer), St. John Paul II noted St. Louis-Marie de Montfort as an exemplary teacher of Marian Spirituality for our times. The Holy Father stated in number 48 that devotion to the Mother of God, as proposed by St. Louis-Marie in *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*, helps Christians to adhere faithfully to the grace of their Baptism. He wrote:

I would like to recall, among the many witnesses and teachers of this Marian spirituality, the figure of Saint Louis Marie Grignon de Montfort, who proposes consecration to Christ through the hands of Mary, as an effective means for Christians to live faithfully their baptismal commitments. I am pleased to note that in our own time

too new manifestations of this spirituality and devotion are not lacking.²

To address our specific topic, the baptismal spirituality of St. Louis-Marie de Montfort, I shall first briefly point to the *teleology* established by the Saint in his parish missions. The missionary challenged all who participated to recognize the central theophany (and mariophany) of their Baptism as the beginning of a journey.

The scope of the topic will require some remarks on the theological and spiritual characteristics of the French School of Spirituality as well as a reference to the the Roman Catechism—the *Catechism of the Council of Trent*—the text that provided the substance for St. Louis-Marie’s preaching on Baptism and the other topics of faith he addressed during his parish missions.

I shall examine the goal and structure of the parish mission as organized and led by St. Louis Marie. The Saint sought to construct a post-baptismal catechumenate through the mission. In a stroke of genius, he envisioned an elaborate and solemn renewal of the baptismal vows at the very font where many of the parishioners had received Baptism as infants. This renewal was to be made in Mary’s hands, that is, within the ambit of her maternal assistance. The Saint hoped that this renewal of vows, a kind of sacramental of the sacrament of Baptism, would be the occasion of an outpouring of the Holy Spirit for the renewal of the Christian life.

² John Paul II, Encyclical *Redemptoris Mater* (March 25, 1987), no. 48.

I shall look at the contribution St. Louis-Marie made in understanding Mary's unique, albeit hidden, role in the mystery of Baptism. Why was he convinced that his consecration provides the Christian with *the perfect renewal of the vows of Holy Baptism*? This will lead us, in the end, to consider the mystery of Marian mediation in terms of a real spiritual motherhood in the order of sanctifying grace.

The Teleology of St. Louis-Marie's Pastoral Program

I shall first point to the obvious: the fundamental connection that St. Louis-Marie forged between Baptism and living the Christian life. He did this by developing a plan for parish missions aimed at bringing the people back to the beginning of their lives as Christians, back to the moment of their Baptism. This especially helped country people, many of whom were poor and uneducated, to understand the gifts they had received from God in Baptism and the power given them to die to sin and live the new life of charity.

These missions were often perceived by the faithful as saving interventions of Christ and Mary in the midst of the drudgery of everyday life in rural France. The missions changed the lives of many parishioners, setting them on a trajectory previously unrecognized on account of severely deficient catechetical instruction. The new route began with an experience of conscious conversion from sin to a life of charity leading to eternal life in heaven. This was grasped as the *end* and purpose of human existence.

Obviously, the people who participated in St. Louis-Marie's missions knew that they were Christians. A mission helped them to realize that their Christian identity began on a specific date. It was a gift initiated and bestowed gratuitously on them by the Holy Trinity in the baptismal

font. This simple washing, a real sharing in Christ's death and resurrection, equipped them to die to sin and live the new life of charity to the end of their days on earth. This teleology gave light, hope, and meaning to people often living in despair. It was simple enough to be understood by young children. St. Louis-Marie was convinced that Mary holds an essential role in every Christian's journey to the Kingdom.

St. Louis-Marie and the Bérullian School of Spirituality

St. Louis de Montfort, ordained in June of 1700, is the beneficiary of the French School of Spirituality. Some suggest that he stands with St. Jean Baptiste de la Salle at the end of a long line of priests renowned for their Christocentric mysticism and apostolic zeal. This list includes Pierre de Bérulle the Founder of the French School, Charles de Condren, St. John Eudes, Jean-Jacques Olier, and St. Vincent de Paul among others.

R. Deville in his article entitled "The French School of Spirituality," writes:

Louis Marie de Montfort is undeniably linked to what is generally known as the French school of spirituality (at times called the Bérullian School or simply, the Bérullians). He received his formation at Saint Sulpice Seminary (1692–1700) and later kept in close touch with his directors of formation; as a result, he is one of the best heirs and witnesses of the French school. H. Bremond has justly called him "the last of the great Bérullians." It must be noted at the outset, however, that although Montfort retained the main characteristics of the doctrine and teaching methods of Cardinal de Bérulle and Jean-Jacques Olier—among the many and varied

spiritual writers used as his sources—he did it in a way distinctively his own.³

At the heart of the spiritual teaching of St. Louis-Marie is the Incarnation of the Word, Eternal Wisdom. In Baptism, Christ saves members of our fallen race from sin (both original and actual), from Satan, and from eternal death. God communicates a share in the life of Christ to the newly incorporated member of his Mystical Body. In the baptismal font, the womb of the Virgin-Mother Church, the Christian becomes a *son or daughter of God the Father in the Son*. With all sins forgiven, the new Christian abides in Christ, and Christ abides in that person through the power of the Spirit. Experiencing interior communion with Christ, the Christian participates in Christ's adoration of the Father and receives a share in Christ's *apostolic spirit*.

In his catechesis, St. Louis-Marie emphasized the indwelling of Christ in the souls of the faithful as the result of Baptism into his death and resurrection. In the seventeenth and early eighteenth-century French Church, there was a concerted effort, especially on the part of missionary preachers, to draw attention to the presence of the risen Christ abiding with the Christian and dwelling in a person's soul through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Montfort understood that the Christian encounters Christ in the mystery of his death and resurrection in Baptism.⁴ For

³ R. Deville, "The French School of Spirituality," in *Jesus Living in Mary: Handbook of the Spirituality of St. Louis Marie de Montfort*, ed. Stefano De Fiores (Bay Shore, NY: Montfort Publications, 1994), 437.

⁴ Christ gives the disciple in baptism the power to die to sin and to live the new life of charity. St. Paul's words to the Christian community in Rome illuminate this point of doctrine:

an adult, this encounter is initiated through saving faith in Christ and the sincere desire to reject sin. In the Baptism of the adult, the Holy Spirit imparts the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. In these gifts are found the supernatural capacities to cooperate with the graces needed for ongoing conversion. In the infant, the Holy Spirit implants the same powers that dispose that person to believe the Gospel and reject sin at the dawning of the age of reason. It was understood that the parents and parish priest of the child would provide the post-baptismal catechumenate that would guide the development of the Christian life. The Saint's zeal in preaching parish missions throughout France was rooted in his awareness that without a thorough catechesis in Catholic doctrine, sacramentology, morality, and prayer, the baptized Christian would be in danger of neglecting or even destroying the power or, more accurately, the presence of the Persons who dwell in a person's soul through Baptism.

What then shall we say? Shall we persist in sin that grace may abound? Of course not! ² How can we who died to sin yet live in it? ³ Or are you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life. ⁵ For if we have grown into union with him through a death like his, we shall also be united with him in the resurrection. ⁶ We know that our old self was crucified with him, so that our sinful body might be done away with, that we might no longer be in slavery to sin. ⁷ For a dead person has been absolved from sin. ⁸ If, then, we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him. ⁹ We know that Christ, raised from the dead, dies no more; death no longer has power over him. ¹⁰ As to his death, he died to sin once and for all; as to his life, he lives for God. ¹¹ Consequently, you too must think of yourselves as [being] dead to sin and living for God in Christ Jesus (Rom 6: 1-11; NAB).

For the missionary preacher, baptismal spirituality demanded a lifelong contact with Jesus Christ in his word and in the sacraments. St. Louis-Marie discovered that the parish mission provided not only instruction in the rudiments of the faith but also spiritual guidance in the practice of ongoing asceticism and mystical prayer.

Along with the other preachers of the French School, Montfort explained that the Christian participates in the mysteries of the life of Christ by encountering the Lord and having appropriate interior dispositions in the liturgy, most particularly in the Eucharist and personal prayer. The Sulpician theologian, Lowell M. Glendon, S.S., explains the centrality of Christ and Baptism in the mystical life of the Christian:

Christ is seen as the incarnate Word, the one who offers perfect religion, i.e., praise, adoration, obedience, and love to God. Therefore, we are called to conform ourselves to Jesus Christ, especially in his “states” (etats), i.e., the interior dispositions through which he faithfully lived out the mysteries of his incarnation, passion, death, resurrection, and ascension. While his actions were transitory, his dispositions are permanent and available to us today; through them we can commune with Jesus and render perfect religion to God. In a strong reading of Gal 2:20, these authors portrayed the life of the Christian as the life of Jesus in us.⁵

It is this current in the French School that led St. Louis-Marie to see the Christian’s love of Mary as a real participation in

⁵ Lowell M. Glendon, S.S., “The French School,” in *New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Michael Downey (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993), 420–421.

Jesus' love for her. It is at the center of the Saint's Christocentric Marian mysticism.

The preachers of the French School venerated Mary as the immaculate, virgin mother of the Word.⁶ They appreciated her active role in the acquisition and distribution of the grace of the redemption. They believed that she had a special relationship with all people and especially with those who believe in Christ. St. Louis-Marie had keen insight into Mary as the human creature most surrendered in love to the Incarnate Word. She gave everything to him—her flesh and blood, her soul with its faculties of intellect and will, all the material and spiritual gifts that she possessed. St. Louis-Marie believed that the Blessed Virgin was so centered on Christ, so selfless, that it was and is impossible for her to do anything but unite others to him. Mary's total consecration to Christ and his redeeming work is the paradigm for the consecration effected in each Christian's soul at Baptism. As we shall see, St. Louis-Marie hoped that, through his Marian Consecration, the spiritual relationship established with the Blessed Mother in Baptism might become explicit, intentional, and fruitful.

Based on his insights into the Mystical Body of Christ, St. Louis-Marie was convinced that, since Mary is the mother of the Head of the Body, and since the life of the Head is in his members through Baptism, Mary is mother of Christ's members in the order of sanctifying grace. Her motherhood of the Christian is not physical, as is her motherhood of Christ. However, it is far from being merely a metaphorical or adoptive motherhood. It is a true

⁶ Patrick Gaffney, S.M.M., "Mary," in De Fiore, *Jesus Living in Mary*, 716.

motherhood in the sphere of grace. This spiritual motherhood begins at the moment of the Incarnation when Mary accepted her mission from God to save her people from their sins. This motherhood in the order of grace was revealed in a public way on Calvary when Jesus indicated that Mary is the beloved disciple's mother and the disciple is Mary's child (Jn 19:25–27). This unique motherhood is actualized every time a person is born again in Baptism through water and the Holy Spirit.

Surely, the *fiat* of Mary to the Angel Gabriel's message that was amplified as she embraced God's will at the foot of Jesus' cross had and has an impact on the Christian's rebirth in Baptism. Mary cooperates with the Holy Spirit in the generation of grace in the human soul and, with a mother's love, cares for that life until her child enters the Kingdom of Heaven. This is perhaps where St. Louis-Marie's intuitive genius shines forth uniquely in the French School. He identifies a real spiritual motherhood that Mary exercises through, with, and in the regenerative work of the Holy Spirit. His Marian Consecration is the discovery and experience of this unique motherhood.

The Goal and Structure of the Parish Mission

In the ideal situation envisioned by the Saint, two missionary priests would arrive in the parish hosting the monthlong mission about two weeks before the arrival of St. Louis-Marie. They would visit the people in their homes and invite them to participate in all the mission events. This was the period of evangelization that Montfort understood as crucial. This prelude to the mission allowed the missionaries to assess the spiritual and temporal needs of the people. Montfort was eager to bring Christ to the poorest, to the sick

and dying, to the outcasts of the villages. These evangelists would identify them.

In their preaching and catechetical instructions during the mission, the missionaries sought to awaken the people's faith in Christ and in the power of his death and resurrection. Most of these people had been baptized as infants but had received little or no instruction on how to live the Christian faith. Although the mission included many catechetical instructions for the parishioners who participated, the Father of the Mission himself preached approximately 50–60 sermons, one in the mornings and another in the evenings. The chief source that St. Louis-Marie used in preparing for the parish missions was the Sacred Scripture. He carried a copy of the New Testament with him wherever he went and, often throughout his day, practiced what is called *lectio divina*. As we shall see, the veneration of the Book of the Gospels by each person who renewed baptismal vows was a high point of the parish missions. It attests to Montfort's belief in the true presence of Christ and the Holy Spirit in the proclamation of the Word.

Well-schooled in the teachings of the Council of Trent, Montfort understood that the *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, published in 1566, instructed the priest to interpret the Scripture properly and to apply it to the lives of his people. The dynamic structure of the *Roman Catechism* deeply permeated Montfort's pastoral consciousness. Part I, explaining salvation history through the lens of the Apostles Creed, presents God's revelation of himself to humankind. The self-disclosure continues in every age of the Church through the preaching of the Word and the celebration of the sacraments (Part 2). Part 3, *on the Decalogue*, describes the

human response of love to God through the observance of his commandments. Finally, Part 4 contains an instruction on Christian prayer, which aids the Christian to persevere in the love of God and neighbor and experience God's presence in this life.

From his sketch of topics for a monthlong mission, we can see the scope of the material that St. Louis-Marie presented to his flock. Jesus Christ, crucified and risen from the dead, was the unifying center of all the sermons he preached. Mary often surfaced in the presentations, especially to note her response to the Word of God. This list is from the Saint's own *Order of Sermons for a Lenten Mission*:

The Word of God
The love of Jesus Christ
The beauty, the price, and the life of the soul
The necessity and difficulty of a good examination of conscience
Four sermons on the examination of conscience
The value of a general confession
Considerations on death
Eternal life
The particular judgment
Heaven
Purgatory
Hell
The Blessed Sacrament
Rule of life
Prayer
Fasting
Almsgiving
The unworthy communion
Fervent communion
Devotion to Mary
The passion of Jesus

The passion of Mary
The resurrection of Jesus
The resurrection of the Christian
The general judgment
Faithfulness and perseverance in the good resolutions made during
the mission
Farewell discourse.⁷

Although St. Louis admittedly had a pessimistic view of human nature apart from Christ's grace, he nonetheless understood that the human person, once graced by God, is capable of heroic self-mastery, penance, sacrifice, and mystical communion with heaven.⁸ It is precisely the preaching of the Gospel that disposes the person to believe in Christ and to surrender that person's life to his service. The disciple of Jesus then encounters the Lord within a person's soul by loving the Father with Jesus' love, by loving others, including one's enemies, with the charity of Christ. Exercising her intercessory role, Mary aids the Christian to receive and cooperate with this sanctifying grace. She shares her faith response to Christ with her sons and daughters.

Besides the instructions in Christian doctrine, morality, and spirituality from the pulpit, the Father of the Mission was available each day along with the other priest-missionaries to hear the confessions of those participating in the mission and offer spiritual direction. Surely, the missionaries helped the people to deal with the problems

⁷ St. Louis-Marie de Montfort, "Sermons," in *God Alone: The Collected Writings of St. Louis-Marie de Montfort* (Bay Shore, NY: Montfort Publications, 1987), 567–572.

⁸ See St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III, q. 69, a. 3.

they faced in their lives and unite their sufferings to the sacrifice of Christ in the Holy Mass.

All attending the mission were also strongly encouraged to make a deep and thorough examination of conscience. The missionary helped the people to make this examen from the pulpit. This exercise of self-reflection had as its goal the reform of Christian living through a heart-felt general confession. The climax of the mission was a Solemn Mass and a reception of Holy Communion with the help of Mary. Interestingly, only those who had made the solemn renewal of the baptismal vows were invited to go to Confession and receive Holy Communion during the mission. Montfort states in his “Rule of the Missionary Priests of the Company of Mary”:

The purpose of these missions is to renew the spirit of Christianity among the faithful. Therefore, the missionaries will see to it that, as the Pope has commanded, the baptismal vows are renewed with the greatest solemnity. They are not to give absolution or communion to any penitent who has not first renewed his baptismal promises with the rest of the parishioners. Only those who have seen the results of this practice can appreciate its value.⁹

Evidently, this rule indicates that St. Louis-Marie understood the renewal of the baptismal vows in Our Lady’s hands as the occasion for a personal, spiritual Mariophany that strengthens a person’s rejection of sin and adherence to God at a new depth and with a renewed intensity of charity. Union with Christ present in the sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist was the goal of Monfortian

⁹ St. Louis-Marie de Montfort, *Rule of the Missionary Priests of the Company of Mary*, in *God Alone*, 421.

missions. The structure was traditional: preaching the Gospel with conviction and force, returning to the moment of one's Baptism in Christ, and renewing that grace through Reconciliation and the Holy Eucharist. We now turn our focus to the genesis of St. Louis-Marie's Consecration to Jesus Christ through Mary.

The Genesis of the Marian Consecration

Consecration to Jesus, Incarnate Wisdom, through Mary as devised by the Saint for the mission was a beautiful, colorful event, replete, when available, with choirs and musical instruments. Many of the hymns were composed by St. Louis-Marie himself; hymns that locked the doctrine of the mission into the memories of those who had heard the Word preached so convincingly by the Saint. This ceremony took place—it would seem—near the mid-point of the monthlong mission.

All walked in the procession into the vestibule of the parish church. There a deacon vested in dalmatic held on his lap the Book of the Gospels. Each person genuflected before the Gospel and kissed the book, saying, "I firmly believe all the truths of the Holy Gospel of Jesus Christ."

Having processed to the baptismal font, the priest greeted the people one by one. Each venerated the font and renewed the vows of Baptism. These vows were offered to God through the Sacred Humanity of Jesus Christ—and through the hands of Mary. It is important to stress that the consecration is entitled by St. Louis-Marie, "Consecration of Oneself to Jesus Christ, Incarnate Wisdom, through the Hands of Mary." One imagines that St. Louis-Marie blessed the consecrants with holy water, recalling the day and the

moment that they had first encountered Jesus Christ in this sacrament.

Then, the procession moved to Our Lady's altar. There, St. Louis-Marie presented each consecrant with a statue of Mary holding the Child Jesus. Each person, venerating the image, prayed, "I give myself entirely to Jesus Christ through the hands of Mary to carry my cross after him all the days of my life." Finally, all returned to the baptismal font to sing the *Credo*. From there, Montfort, holding aloft the Book of the Gospels, went to the pulpit to preach on the great blessing of renewing one's baptismal promises in the hands of Mary. She would help her children to crush the head of Satan (Gen 3:15) and adhere in love to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

This ceremony constructed by St. Louis-Marie was a sacramental of the sacrament of Baptism that the parishioners had received as infants. It offered them the opportunity to receive the Word of God and commit themselves to a thorough renewal of Christian values in their lives—a renewal through a heightened, affective relationship with the Blessed Virgin. The objective appropriation of the grace of their Baptism would take place when they confessed their sins, preferably after having made a general confession and received absolution. This absolution would restore their baptismal holiness if it had been lost through mortal sin and prepare the way to a fervent reception of Holy Communion, also with the help of Mary.¹⁰

¹⁰ St. Louis de Montfort, *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary*, nos. 266–273, in *God Alone*, 375–377.

The cumulative effect of Montfort's mission helped the participants to experience that, in Baptism, the Holy Spirit brings the Christian into a real communion with the Risen Christ who, while in heaven and in the Blessed Sacrament, is also mysteriously present in the soul through grace. The Christian must welcome this indwelling of the Trinity in the soul through the act of faith and the self-gift of charity, both informed by grace. The movement whereby the catechumen turns away from sin and clings to God in love necessarily includes a free self-surrender to the Lord, an acceptance of him on his terms, in a Holy Slavery of Love. This slavery component of the consecration is often off-putting to people today. The Saint stressed that it is a slavery of love—the same love that inspired the Eternal Word of God to empty himself and take the form of a slave; the love that motivated Mary to give herself without reserve to God's plan of salvation by remaining faithful at the foot of the cross; the love that binds parent to child, especially at difficult moments of life. With its solid scriptural foundations, the concept of slave of love forcefully hammers home the truth that authentic faith demands a sincere conversion from sin. It is God alone who has the sovereign right to dictate the terms of the conversion. To become deiform—that is, God-like—the disciple must first accept the Word of God in its entirety with its beautiful and sometimes very difficult commandments. It is only in the sincere quest to live according to the Gospel, that the disciple becomes a friend of God.

This fundamental turning away from sin to God is sacramentalized in Baptism. Through the invocation of the Holy Spirit (*epiclesis*), Christ's dying and rising are

remembered and re-presented (*anamnesis*). The encounter with the Lord brings salvation and eternal life of *agape* to the catechumen. The Christian, in the act of faith in Christ and in sincere conversion from sin, encounters Jesus in the mystery of his death and resurrection. With Christ and through his power, the Christian freely dies to sin and begins to live by charity. Herein is the root of all Christian asceticism and mysticism.

St. Louis held that the Holy Spirit interiorly transforms the believer into the image of Christ in Baptism. His conviction was based on the words of St. Paul: “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me” (Gal 2:20; RSV Catholic ed.).

For St. Louis-Marie, relationships are initiated in the waters of Baptism. Through Christ’s presence in the soul, his Father becomes *our* Father. Relating to him as our *Abba*, we share in the intimacy of Jesus’ communion with him. We become brothers and sisters of Jesus and one another in that primary baptismal relationship. These relationships are explicit in the baptismal rite. What remains implicit in the rite is the Christian’s filial relationship with Mary. In fully accepting Christ as our Lord and Savior, we accept his Father as *our Father*, his mother as our mother, and with them, the whole family of the Church united in faith, hope, and charity. The Marian Consecration as taught by the Saint makes Mary’s motherhood *in the Spirit* explicit and intentional in the life of the Christian.

In *True Devotion to Mary*, St. Louis-Marie teaches that devotion to Mary is a participation in Christ’s love for her.

Where Mary is present, the evil one is absent. One of the unmistakable signs that a person is led by the Spirit of God is the devotion he has to Mary, and his habit of thinking and speaking of her. This is the opinion of a saint, who goes on to say that just as breathing is a proof that the body is not dead, so the habitual thought of Mary and loving converse with her is a proof that the soul is not spiritually dead in sin (*True Devotion*, 166).

Early in his life, St. Louis-Marie, an avid student of the Fathers of the Church, reflected upon the Gospel of the Annunciation. He recognized Mary as the *New Eve*, who, through her faith, opened the way to salvation. By her faith, she undid the harm caused by Eve's disbelief. Her trust in God untied the knot of Eve's dark suspicion. The Saint grasped that God established a definite pattern of action in the Incarnation. Since the Word became flesh in Mary not only through the creative power of the Holy Spirit but also through Mary's faith assent, her *fiat*, St. Louis-Marie perceived a kind of spousal relationship between the Holy Spirit and Our Lady. He recognized a divine-human synergy not only at the first moment of the Incarnation, but subsequently in the distribution of the grace of the Redeemer during the age of the Church. St. Louis-Marie knew that God alone could bring a person dead in sin into the life of the Trinity through grace. However, God wills Mary's union with the Holy Spirit in our re-birth in Christ. Stated simply, by God's design beginning with the Incarnation, the Holy Spirit and Mary together are united in the generation of Christ, both Head and Members.

This insight led St. Louis de Montfort to become an eloquent preacher of Mary's spiritual motherhood. With, through, and in the Holy Spirit, she who gave human nature to the Son of God gives birth spiritually to Christ in the souls

of the faithful and nurtures that life. As stated earlier, Mary's motherhood of the baptized is neither a metaphorical motherhood nor an adoptive motherhood, but a true motherhood in the order of sanctifying grace.

St. Louis presents this teaching on Mary's spiritual motherhood as he lays out the principles that form the foundation of his teaching on Baptism in Christ:

God the Holy Spirit, who does not produce any divine person, became fruitful through Mary whom he espoused. It was with her, in her and of her that he produced his masterpiece, God-made-man, and that he produces every day until the end of the world the members of the body of this adorable Head. For this reason, the more he finds Mary his dear and inseparable spouse in a soul the more powerful and effective he becomes in producing Jesus Christ in that soul and that soul in Jesus Christ.

This does not mean that the Blessed Virgin confers on the Holy Spirit a fruitfulness which he does not already possess. Being God, he has the ability to produce just like the Father and the Son, although he does not use this power and so does not produce another divine person. But it does mean that the Holy Spirit chose to make use of our Blessed Lady, although he had no absolute need of her, in order to become actively fruitful in producing Jesus Christ and his members in her and by her. This is a mystery of grace unknown even to many of the most learned and spiritual of Christians.¹¹

Mary exercises this maternal ministry through and with the Church. Although St. Louis-Marie did not explicitly draw out the ecclesiological significance of Mary's spiritual motherhood, the doctrine is implicitly and, one might say, intuitively present in his writings. Mary as image and model

¹¹ *True Devotion*, nos. 20–21, in *God Alone*, 295–296.

of the Church became marvelously explicit in the twentieth century in the writings of theologians such as Henri de Lubac, Hugo Rahner, Otto Semmelroth, Hans Urs von Balthasar, St. John Paul II, and Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI.¹²

The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) of Vatican Council II articulates this doctrine that is built solidly on indications present in both Scripture and the writings of the Fathers that Mary, assumed into heaven, accompanies the Church on earth and participates in the Church's mission through her intercessions and maternal interventions. It is not difficult to hear Montfort's teaching echoing through the words of the Council Fathers:

By her belief and obedience, not knowing man but overshadowed by the Holy Spirit, as the new Eve she brought forth on earth the very Son of the Father, showing an undefiled faith, not in the word of the ancient serpent, but in that of God's messenger. The Son whom she brought forth is He whom God placed as the first-born among many brethren, namely the faithful, in whose birth and education she cooperates with a maternal love.¹³

¹² See St. John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater*, nos. 42–47, for a luminous explanation of the perichoresis of Mary and the Church in the distribution of the grace of the Redemption.

¹³ “Beata autem Virgo divinae maternitatis dono et munere, quo cum Filio Redemptore unitur, suisque singularibus gratiis et muneribus, etiam cum Ecclesia intime coniungitur: Deipara est Ecclesiae typus, ut iam docebat S. Ambrosius, in ordine scilicet fidei, caritatis et perfectae cum Christo unionis (188). In mysterio enim Ecclesiae, quae et ipsa iure mater vocatur et virgo, Beata Virgo Maria praecessit, eminenter et singulariter tum virginis tum matris exemplar praebens (189). Credens enim et oboediens, ipsum Filium Patris in terris genuit, et quidem viri nescia, Spiritu Sancto obumbrata, tamquam nova Heva, non serpenti antiquo, sed Dei nuntio praestans fidem, nullo dubio adulteratam. Filium autem nempe, ad quos gignendos et educandos materno amore cooperatur.” Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium* (November 21, 1964), 63.

I have long been intrigued by the last sentence of paragraph 63 of *Lumen Gentium*. The Council Fathers affirm that Mary cooperates with the Trinity and presumably with the Church in the birth and education of the members of Christ's Body. Based on his preparation for the Marian Consecration, *the perfect renewal of the baptismal promises*,¹⁴ St. Louis-Marie intimates Mary's role in the birthing of every new Christian. In Baptism, God creates grace in the soul of the catechumen, which is, among other things, a disposition to believe the Word of God, to surrender one's life to him. and to give him everything—just as Mary did during her journey through this life. It includes the disposition not only to find God in the light of faith but also to trust him when all that one experiences is darkness.

In *True Devotion to Mary*, St. Louis-Marie states simply and beautifully that Mary shares her faith with her children:

Mary will share her faith with you. Her faith on earth was stronger than that of all the patriarchs, prophets, apostles and saints. Now that she is reigning in heaven, she no longer has this faith, since she sees everything clearly in God by the light of glory. However, with the consent of almighty God she did not lose it when entering heaven. She has preserved it for her faithful servants in the Church militant. Therefore, the more you gain the friendship of this noble Queen and faithful Virgin the more you will be inspired by faith in your daily

¹⁴ The Saint insists that there are three reasons the consecration should be called the "perfect" renewal of the vows of Baptism. First, in baptism we ordinarily speak by the mouth of another, our godfather or godmother, and so we give ourselves to Jesus Christ not by ourselves but through another. But in this devotion, we do it by ourselves, voluntarily, knowing what we are doing. Second, in baptism we do not give him, the Lord, the value of all our good actions, as we do in this consecration. Third, in Baptism "we do not give ourselves to Jesus explicitly through Mary," as we do in the perfect consecration. (*True Devotion*, no. 126; in *God Alone*, 329).

life. It will cause you to depend less upon sensible and extraordinary feelings. For it is a lively faith animated by love enabling you to do everything from no other motive than that of pure love. It is a firm faith, unshakable as a rock, prompting you to remain firm and steadfast in the midst of storms and tempests. It is an active and probing faith which like some mysterious passkey admits you into the mysteries of Jesus Christ and of man's final destiny and into the very heart of God himself. It is a courageous faith which inspires you to undertake and carry out without hesitation great things for God and the salvation of souls. Lastly, this faith will be your flaming torch, your very life with God, your secret fund of divine Wisdom, and an all-powerful weapon for you to enlighten those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death. It inflames those who are lukewarm and need the gold of fervent love. It restores life to those who are dead through sin. It moves and transforms hearts of marble and cedars of Lebanon by gentle and convincing argument. Finally, this faith will strengthen you to resist the devil and the other enemies of salvation.¹⁵

Might we not take this insight a step further by saying that, as the Holy Spirit creates grace in the soul of the catechumen, Mary concomitantly, accepting each new son or daughter as a gift of her Son (Jn 19:25–27), somehow shares with her offspring her receptivity to the grace of God and assisting them to respond to grace as she did? Mary at the moment of Baptism gifts each of her spiritual children with her receptivity to grace in a unique way, a way suited to the providential plan of God for each.¹⁶ Mary's receptivity to the Word and to his grace is a gift that the Christian always experiences and rarely acknowledges explicitly as a Marian gift. For some, it is a gift never explicitly recognized and

¹⁵ Montfort, *True Devotion*, no. 214, in *God Alone*, 358–359.

¹⁶ See St. John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater*, no. 45, on the spiritual bonding between mother and child that takes place in Baptism.

acknowledged in this life. I am thinking both of Catholic men and women who received little or no catechetical instruction on Mary's role in the Christian life and of grace-filled non-Catholic Christians who seek holiness in Christ. Then, there are those who never hear Christ's name preached, but through an implicit baptism of desire sincerely seek to know the true God and do his will. The dynamo that drove the Saint from Montfort was his conviction, born of faith, that true devotion to Mary is a baptismal gift that serves communion with the Trinity.

Might we not say that as Christ is the Mediator of all Grace (1 Tim 2:5), so Mary, in a maternal role uniquely related to his Mediation and subordinated to it, somehow contributes significantly to the human person's receptivity to God? She does this at least through the example of her life and her heavenly intercession. St. Louis-Marie was fascinated by the wonders that are subsequent upon her arrival in a person's spiritual life. He rarely preached the Word of God without speaking of Mary's response to it. He venerated her hidden but active presence at the baptismal font. He knew that she was most adroit at leading her children away from sin into a holy way of life. Better than any other human person, she knows how to crush the serpent's head (Gen 3:15). The Saint intuited that Mary will perfectly teach her children to receive Jesus in Holy Communion worthily and fruitfully, to receive him as she had received him. St. Louis-Marie was convinced that God had entrusted to Mary the preparation of the world for the Second Coming of Christ.

St. Louis-Marie taught that Mary's reception of the Word and her transformation in grace stands behind and

supports every disciple's response. The Fathers of Vatican Council II clearly endorsed Montfort in teaching that Mary is spiritual mother of all the faithful. We may hope that the Magisterium of the Church with the assistance of holy men and women who experience Mary's motherhood and sound Mariologists will soon explain with greater precision how the Blessed Mother gives birth spiritually to every new member of Christ's Body. We are grateful to St. Louis-Marie for many spiritual insights. Perhaps first among them is his identification of Mary's inextricable place in the Mystery of Holy Baptism.

Biographical Note

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