

The Timelessness of an Ancient Devotion

Far from being a devotion that arose with St. Louis Marie Grignon de Montfort, the practice of consecration to the Blessed Virgin as a slave of love dates back to the dawn of Christianity.



Sr. Lucilia Veas, EP

One of the most captivating themes in Catholic piety is undoubtedly Our Lady. What devotee does not experience ineffable love in speaking of her? Has anyone ever turned to her in vain?

Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary has flourished in the hearts of the faithful from the beginnings of the Church. Even in earliest Christian times, she was the object of great veneration, of acts of love and of confidence, as the oldest icons and touching hymns of the primitive Church prove. It can further be affirmed that devotion to the Mother of God was transmitted by the Apostles themselves, for it would be absurd to interpose a period of silence between them and the first Fathers of the Church, who do not fail to mention her in their writings.

Considered “the venerable treasure of the whole earth,”¹ Our Lady was, for Christians, the perfect im-

age of Our Lord Jesus Christ and a sure route to reach Him. As Msgr. João Scognamiglio Clá Dias points out, “Both Mother and Son, inseparable, are the archetype of creation, the exemplary and final cause, in light of which all other men were predestined.”²

Each time someone praises her, she glorifies Jesus

Let us consider the narrative of St. Luke at the opening of his Gospel from this perspective.

Having received the visit of St. Gabriel the Archangel, the Virgin Mary proclaims: “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (1:38). Shortly afterwards, hearing her cousin, St. Elizabeth exclaims: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? [...] And blessed is she who believed that there would be

a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord” (1:42-43,45).

We see the Virgin Mary, proclaimed “blessed” because she believed, declared herself to be the handmaid of the Lord and became the Mother of the Messiah, immediately redirecting to God the praise she has received: “My soul magnifies the Lord, [...] for He has regarded the low estate of His handmaiden. For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed” (1:46,48).

It is ever the same: whenever someone praises her, she immediately glorifies her Divine Son. To venerate her, then, is an excellent way of glorifying Jesus, as the Magisterium of the Church has always taught, and which was reaffirmed by the Second Vatican Council: “In no way does [devotion to Our Lady] impede, but rather does it foster the immediate union of the faithful with Christ.”³



Sergio Hollmann

The Annunciation, by Fra Angelico - Prado Museum, Madrid

Origin of slavery to Our Lady

It becomes evident that the practice of slavery to Our Lady sprang from the most sublime event in history: the Incarnation of the Word, when God became Man, submitting Himself to her (cf. Lk 2:51). With the Apostle’s testimony that Christ “emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men” (Phil 2:7), we understand His wish that this occur in her, leaving us His divine example and inviting us to imitate Him.

Documents dating to the very beginning of Church history extol the sanctity of the Mother of God, men-

tion her role as Mediatrix, refer to her as Lady, and, in due time, give her the title of Queen of creation.⁴ In such manifestations of veneration can be recognized the first stages, the foundations of devotion to her which culminate in consecration as a slave of love.

St. Ephrem the Syrian was the first Father of the Church known to proclaim himself as servant of Mary.⁵ Many others followed him along this luminous path of consecration of love. Objects found from the fifth and sixth centuries in different places throughout the Byzantine Empire—rings, chains and coins among others—are engraved

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with inscriptions identifying the bearer as a “slave of the Mother of God.”⁶



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The Visitation - Trinità dei Monti, Rome

In the seventh century, we witness St. Ildephonsus of Toledo declare: “If I am thy servant, it is because thy Son is my Lord. Thou art my Sovereign, for thou art the Slave of my Lord. I am the servant of the Servant of my Lord, because thou, my Sovereign, art the Mother of my Lord.”⁷

And he continues: “To show that I am at the service of the Lord, I give as proof the dominion His Mother exercises over me, for to serve His Slave is to serve Him. [...] With what enthusiasm I desire to be the servant of this Sovereign! With what fidelity do I wish to submit to her yoke! With what perfection do I strive to be docile to her commands! With what ardour am I determined not to withdraw from her dominion! With what eagerness I desire to always be numbered among her true servants! Thus, may it be granted me to serve her through duty and, serving her, to merit her blessings and to always be her irreprehensible servant.”⁸

In Ireland, between the ninth and twelfth centuries, there is evi-

dence that it was such a great honour to be called a servant of Mary that this title became a given name, used even by members of the royal family.⁹ The hearts of Catholics from East to West beat as one in relation to the Mother of God: to become her slave was taken as one of the most sublime and ineffable honours.

The voice of grace, which inspired both illustrious figures and common people to consecrate themselves as slaves to the Virgin Mary, could not but speak to several Successors of Peter. At the beginning of the eighth century, we find Pope John VII proclaiming himself a servant of Mary; many after him would do the same, including Nicholas IV, Pius II, Paul V, Alexander VIII, Clement IX, and Innocent XI.

A religious order of servants

The pontifical approval of the Order of the Servants of Mary—the Servites—, founded in 1233, was also significant. As the annals of this institution testify, it was the Blessed Virgin herself who inspired the

name: “From the beginning of our Order, that is, when our illustrious first fathers gathered in community to initiate it, they came to be popularly known by the name of ‘friar Servants of the Blessed Virgin Mary’, without their knowing whence and from whom this name came. It is accordingly concluded that, from the beginning, this name came from none other than the Blessed Virgin Mary herself, through the people, who, inspired by God, approved and acclaimed this name not invented by the human mind.”¹⁰

The document continues: “As Our Lady did not desire that the origin of the Order would be attributed to any man, so likewise it was right that the name of the Order of her friars would not be chosen and given by any other than herself and her Divine Son. Thus, it was the will of Our Lady that this name chosen by her would become commonly used among the people.”¹¹

The fact of attributing the name *Servants of Mary* to a group of men who were a source of edification by their new way of life, clearly shows

Epitome of Marian Cult

the esteem ascribed to this title by the people, and demonstrates that becoming a servant of Our Lady—consecrating one's life to her—was already a widespread custom at that time, easily grasped by souls imbued with faith.

Harmony between doctrine and popular piety

Over the course of time, the number of people summoned by grace to consecrate themselves to Our Lady as slaves of love increased, without theology taking any particular concern to set forth the doctrine referring to her. This is normal, given the evidence that the truths concerning Mary have always been first entrusted to the loving and simple hearts of the Christian people, before the rationale of speculative theology. A famous scholar in this field observed that some things are much more readily perceived by the ardent love of a son than by the calculated reasoning of the scholar.¹²

However, when the orthodoxy of this devotion was questioned, there was no dearth of scholars with the hearts of sons who were able to demonstrate it methodically, clearly and with solid doctrinal foundations. Among this number were St. Bernard, St. Albert the Great, St. Bonaventure, Richard of St. Lawrence and, most especially, St. Louis Marie Grignon de Montfort. Basing themselves on the privilege of divine motherhood granted to Our Lady, her fullness of grace, the love dispensed to her by the Holy Trinity and the homage rendered by the Son of God to His earthly Mother, they proved the theological legitimacy of the act of consecration as a slave of love to Mary.

In 1595, a Spanish Conceptionist, Mother Inês Bautista de San Pablo, founded the *Confraternity of the*

Beyond the cult of veneration, love, gratitude, invocation and imitation, the cult of slavery is due to the Blessed Virgin, as Queen of the entire universe. This ultimate act of Marian cult admirably summarizes all the others that we have covered.

The slave faithful to his Queen, if he truly is so, *venerates* her, first of all, acknowledging her unique perfection. Secondly, he *loves* her and does what pleases her, avoiding everything that offends her. He is filled with *gratitude* toward her for the great blessings she has granted him. He is full of *confidence* in his Queen, for he knows that she sees everything he needs, desires and able to come to his aid. Finally, the servant faithful to his Queen, if he is truly so, strives to *imitate her*, for he recognizes her as his ideal model.

In this way, the act of slavery is the epitome of all the other acts of special cult which we owe to Mary Most Holy, Mother of God, Mother of men, Co-Redemptrix



Mary and Jesus between St. James, St. Anthony and two other saints, by Master of Montefoscoli - Museum of Fine Arts, Dijon (France)

of mankind, dispenser of all divine graces, and unsurpassable model for our lives.

ROSCHINI, OSM, Gabriel María. *La Madre de Dios según la fe y la teología*. 2.ed. Madrid: Apostolado de la Prensa, 1958, v.II, p.363.

Slaves of the Mother of God in Alcalá de Henares, the first association formed with the explicit objective of encouraging and practicing Marian slavery, which, at that time, had spread throughout the whole European continent. And to Cardinal Pierre de Bérulle, founder of the So-

ciety of the Oratory, went the glory of introducing it in France.

Father Jean-Jacques Olier, founder of the Seminary and Society of St. Sulpice, of Paris, further propagated it, introducing its sweet aroma into the French school of spirituality, wherein St. Louis Marie Grignon

de Montfort was formed. This Saint, with his *Treatise of True Devotion to Mary*, definitively enunciated the consecration as a slave of love to Jesus by Mary: “The more one is consecrated to Mary, the more one is consecrated to Jesus. That is why perfect consecration to Jesus is but a perfect and complete consecration of oneself to the Blessed Virgin.”¹³

Nevertheless, many people find the word *slave* shocking and argue that in the first centuries the expression used was *servant of Mary* — *servus Mariæ*, in Latin — to signify this total and complete and confident giving of oneself to Our Lady. Now, both terms can be used interchangeably, for the Latin word

*servus*¹⁴ has the same meaning as the word *slave*, which came into much wider usage with St. Louis de Montfort.

A recent Pope consecrated to Mary

Might not this form of devotion to Mary be a little anachronistic, no longer relevant for our days?

Not according to one of the most recent Popes, who carried out his long pontificate under an unquestionably Marian motto: *Totus tuus*. In the Encyclical *Redemptoris Mater*, St. John Paul II teaches: “Marian *spirituality*, like its corresponding devotion, finds a very rich source in the historical experience of individuals and

of the various Christian communities present among the different peoples and nations of the world. In this regard, I would like to recall, among the many witnesses and teachers of this 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.”¹⁵

On the occasion of his visit to the Shrine of Jasna Gora, in 1979, the same Pope John Paul II more



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¹ ST. CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA. *Homilia IV*: MG 77, 991.

² CLÁ DIAS, EP, João Scognamiglio. Predestined From All Eternity. In: *New Insights on the Gospels*. Città del Vaticano-Nobleton: LEV; Lumen Sapientiae, 2013, v.VII, p.16.

³ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL. *Lumen gentium*, n.60.

⁴ Innumerable ancient documents refer to Mary Most Holy under these titles and privileges. To mention but a few, we cite: cf. ST. SOPHRONIUS OF JERUSALEM. In *SS. Deiparæ Annuntiationem*. Oratio II, c.XXI: MG 87, 3242; HESYCHIUS OF JERUSALEM. In *Præsentatione Domini et Salvatoris nostri Iesu Christi*. Sermo I: MG 93, 1470; ST. GER-

MANUS OF CONSTANTINOPLE. In *Præsentatione SS. Deiparæ*. Sermo I, c.IX-X: MG 98, 302-303; In *Annuntiationem SS Deiparæ*: MG 98, 322; ST. METHODIUS OF OLYMPUS. *Sermo de Simeone et Anna quo die Dominico in templo occurrerunt, ac de Sancta Deipara*, c.V: MG 18, 359.

⁵ Cf. ST. LOUIS MARIE GRIGNION DE MONT-

FORT. *Tratado da verdadeira devoção à Santíssima Virgem*, n.152. 15.ed. Petrópolis: Vozes, 1987, p.147.

⁶ ROSCHINI, OSM, Gabriel Maria. *La Madre de Dios, según la fe y la teología*. 2.ed. Madrid: Apostolado de la Prensa, 1958, v.II, p.370.

⁷ ST. ILDEPHONSUS OF TOLEDO. *De Virginitate*

fully explained the essence of this consecration. Referring to the “act of total servitude to the Mother of God” promoted by the Primate of Poland in 1966, he explained: “The act speaks of ‘servitude’. It contains a paradox similar to the words of the Gospel according to which one must lose one’s life to find it (cf. Mt 10:39). For love constitutes the fulfilment of freedom, yet at the same time ‘belonging’, and so not being free is part of its essence. However, this ‘not being free’ in love is not felt as slavery but rather as an affirmation and fulfilment of freedom. The act of consecration in slavery indicates therefore a unique dependence and a limitless trust. In this sense, slavery (non-freedom) expresses the fullness of freedom, in the same way as the Gospel speaks of the need to lose one’s life in order to find it in its fullness.”¹⁶

In this way, paraphrasing St. Paul (cf. Rom 8:21), St. John Paul II invites us to participate in the glorious liberty of the slaves of Mary.

Slavery that liberates, liberty that enslaves

A year after the visit of the fondly remembered Pontiff to Jasna Gora, in an article written for the newspaper *Folha de São Paulo*, Prof. Plínio Corrêa de Oliveira summarized this paradox with these words: “there is a slavery that liberates, and a liberty that enslaves.”¹⁷

He denounced the radical inversion of values in the mentality of modern man “emancipated” from the obligation of fulfilling the Commandments of God and of the Church: “some consider him free who, with his reason dimmed and his will broken and driven by the madness of his senses, is capable of sliding voluptuously downward in the toboggan of bad habits. And he is a ‘slave’ who serves reason itself, overcomes his passions with his will power, obeys divine and human laws, and puts order into practice.”¹⁸

He went on to say, that for those who consecrate themselves freely to the Blessed Virgin as “slaves of love”, she obtains “the graces of God that raise their intellects to the most lucid understanding of the highest themes of the Faith, that imparts to their wills an angelic strength to rise freely to these ideals and to conquer all interior and exterior obstacles that unduly oppose themselves to them. [...] The ‘slavery of love’ is, then, for all the faithful, that angelic and supreme liberty with which Our Lady awaits us at the threshold of the twenty-first century, smilingly and appealingly inviting us to her reign, according to her promise in Fatima: ‘Finally, my Immaculate Heart will triumph.’”¹⁹ ✧



Pilgrim statue of the Immaculate Heart of Mary

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Perpetua S. Mariæ, c.XII: ML 96, 106.

⁸ Idem, 107-108.

⁹ Cf. WATERTON, FSA, Edmund. *Pietas Mariana Britannica. A History of English Devotion to the Most Blessed Virgin Marye Mother of God*. London: St. Joseph’s Catholic Library, 1879, p.20.

¹⁰ AUTHOR UNKNOWN. *Legenda da origem da Ordem dos Servos da Bem-Aventurada Virgem Maria*, c.VII, n.32. In: *Ordo Servorum Mariæ*: <http://servidimaria.net>.

¹¹ Idem, *ibidem*.

¹² Cf. MARÍN-SOLA, Francisco. *La evolución homogénea del dogma católico*. Madrid: BAC, 1952, p.405.

¹³ ST. LOUIS MARIE GRIGNON DE MONTFORT, op. cit., n.120, p.119.

¹⁴ “*Servus est res* — The slave is a thing.” ancient Roman Law prescribes.

¹⁵ ST. JOHN PAUL II. *Redemptoris Mater*, n.48.

¹⁶ ST. JOHN PAUL II. *Homily and Act of Consecration to Our Lady at the Mar-*

ian Shrine of Jasna Gora, 4/6/1979.

¹⁷ CORRÊA DE OLIVEIRA, Plínio. Obedecer para ser livre [Obey in Order to Be Free]. In: *Folha de São Paulo*. São Paulo. Year LIX. N.18.798 (20 set. 1980); p.3.

¹⁸ Idem, *ibidem*

¹⁹ Idem, *ibidem*.