

DEVOTION TO MARY IN THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

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IT is a common theme in Marian theology that our Lady's motherhood of men means that in some way we are born of her when we are born into the life of grace. What that means exactly no one knows; there is divergence of opinions about the closeness of Mary's work in our souls to the work of the Holy Ghost. Evidently our Lady does not save us; to what extent God has chosen to associate her with himself in this divine work is not yet known, and perhaps never will be till we see it all in retrospect, in heaven.

Our Lady is our spiritual mother. Here we are on safe ground. If we ponder on that fact, work out its implications, act on it, we shall be sure of 'thinking with the Church'—*sentire cum Ecclesia*. Our earthly mothers give us life, earthly life, though they do not create our souls. Mary gives us spiritual life—she is called Mediatrix of all graces—but she does not give us grace as from herself, for it is God's own gift.

We may thank her, then, for all that we have in the spiritual life without troubling our heads about the exact way in which it is given. But it is best in the spiritual life to look at things from above rather than from below, from God's point of view rather than our own. In this particular matter it is also necessary to look at things from our Lady's point of view—from above in that sense. Her interest in us is that of a mother in her children. 'Interest', of course, is a feeble word. It is a relationship that she has with us. 'Mother-love' is the right word.

Being our mother she cannot possibly put a limit to her desire to help us. In the great matter, the life-and-death matter, of salvation, she has given us Jesus. We must not think of this as something that happened in the distant past. She, we may be sure, does not think of it in that way; for her it is as if she had become the mother of Jesus—and thus our mother—only today, as if God had said only today, 'Behold thy son!'. We may find it difficult to eliminate time and

distance like that, but for God, and for Mary, it is easy. She takes each one of us as her child exactly as she took St John for her child at the foot of the cross.

Thus the basis of our devotion to Mary should be a realization that she is our mother. Nothing less will do, because nothing less will enable us to see things from her point of view. Suppose we were unaware of the identity of our human parents, and then suddenly discovered who they were. We should not have any doubts or hesitations about our attitude to them. Motherhood is one of those things which do not need to be studied but only remembered, pondered upon. Every man is capable of writing a book about his mother—and if his words were stumbling, incoherent, jumbled, that would not be because he did not have the whole matter, from first to last chapter, very clear in his heart.

But let us suppose that we do not 'feel a great devotion' to our blessed Lady. Our basic principle holds good. We sometimes do not 'feel a great devotion' to our earthly mothers. If our actions, and the few words we do say, express a real, deep love, a mother does not mind so much about the lack of demonstration, of caresses, of special attention. She may even prefer that we should not try to be fussy, if we do not feel like it. Can it be that just as there are different mothers, and different sons, in this respect, some reserved, others demonstrative, so there are many different types of children of Mary, and she is to each one a perfect mother, according to his disposition and natural bent? It may be, at least in theory. In fact it must be true to the extent that as grace perfects nature, so our Lady perfects nature.

Nevertheless it is not very likely that Mary, being a perfect mother, can ever agree to being *forgotten*. That, I think, is the one unpardonable fault in our devotion to Mary. Our Lord complains of forgetfulness. His sacred Heart is pierced by neglect, and so is our Lady's.

I said that all we need to do is to ponder on the fact that she is our mother. The result will be, of course, that we discover a lot of things which had never occurred to us before. If we are inclined to intellectual speculation we shall be, before we know where we are, budding theologians—

mariologists (unpleasant-looking word, but harmless if kept in place). We shall then be in danger of having so great, so overpowering an idea of Mary that our love may seem in danger of shrinking from sheer timidity—as if we had discovered that our mother was more admirable than lovable. However, I believe that this danger can safely be ignored. In fact it does not work out like that. We *always* love her more by knowing her better.

A word about this matter of pondering ('intellectually' or just lovingly). It will not do to go about it negatively, as those do who are afraid of making some mistake in their praise of Mary. We do not need to be afraid of mistakenly praising her. Our spiritual common sense should be proof against that. The only serious mistake we could make would be to attribute something to her that belongs of right to God alone. For our own sakes, in our own personal devotion, we may—and I think we should—ignore those fearful people who issue solemn warnings about not scandalizing protestants. Such things are a matter of prudence in speaking *with* non-Catholics. They do not apply to our own thoughts about our own mother. We live in a bleak spiritual climate. We must not grow rugged and cold but rather nourish the warmth that is in us. The spiritual climate, in this metaphor, is made, in the long run, by people. We must try to change it, gradually, and first of all by leading a sunny, healthy, Catholic spiritual life ourselves.¹

But there are many wonderful things that could be said about the influence of devotion to Mary on our spiritual life. They have been said, and are still being said, by saints and theologians, year by year. They all seem to amount to this, that devotion to Mary is a progressive consciousness and realisation of the fact that Mary is the mother of Jesus and our mother also. Whether we stress, with St Alphonsus (and so many others), Mary's role as protectress and helper,

¹ It seems a great pity to me that sometimes writers on spiritual subjects suffer from a sort of protestant cramp in this matter. The latest example I have noticed is *The Blessed Virgin*, by Jean Guilton, which was published a while ago. M. Guilton seems to be making an attempt to please Protestants by paring away large sections of commonly accepted teaching about our Lady—with the excuse, I suppose, that they are not *de fide*. It is an attitude entirely out of keeping with sound Marian theology.

bringing us powerfully, as it were, from outside, to Jesus, or whether we consider the matter from the inside, stressing the intimate connection between Mary's work and the work of the Holy Ghost (as did St Louis-Marie de Montfort and again many others), we are simply living, ever more consciously, the knowledge that Mary is God's mother and our mother.

Thus we may gather the flowers of Marian writings, devotional and intellectual (the two should be one, but, alas, they are not) on all sides. If we come across learned explanations of the *way* in which Mary mothers us, and can give them a *real* assent, all the better. If we find them slightly unreal we had perhaps best leave them alone. Our Lady's way, with each one, is personal, as a mother's must be.

The natural effect of a growing realization of Mary's motherhood is that we become like her. There is no need to analyse this. It is clear that a man who loves his mother and is devoted to her will instinctively defer to her, and those traits of character which he had inherited from her will be accentuated as the years go by. He will also come to think very much as she does. I think that for our present purpose we may notice this especially in people's attitude to suffering and sorrow. Those who love our Lady and think about her a great deal become, automatically, so to speak, more compassionate and more willing to dwell upon the thought of suffering with and for Jesus. This will not seem strange when we remember that it was at the foot of the cross that Mary received us as her children.

This, then, is the role of devotion to Mary in the spiritual life, that it makes us realise that she is our spiritual mother who brought us into the spiritual life and rears us for our eternal home; and that means, in fact, becoming like her, as children are like their mothers. Anything that seems over and above this is really only a part of it, an expression of it—and it may vary much with different souls.