

De Montfort's True Devotion to Mary

Because Louis-Marie de Montfort is a latter-time saint, many think that his system of devotion is a comparatively modern development. But he disclaims having originated the devotion or any aspect of it. He gives examples of persons who, seven hundred years before his own day, had made the Consecration after the same fashion which he himself recommends. Moreover, he asserts that the idea was not new even then. He quotes Boudon as saying that it went still further back in that precise form. Finally he claims that the idea would spring naturally from the very foundations of Christianity.

From this it is to be seen that the True Devotion is no invention of a few centuries ago, but merges into the mists of antiquity. That makes it ancient enough, but possibly not enough to dispel the uneasiness of those who think (as the bulk of Protestants would) that the True Devotion and Mariology in general belong to an era of Catholic departure from primitive purity of doctrine. Most of that

school of thought assigns the fifth or sixth century as the time when Mariology began to appear. When we analyse this accusation closely, it becomes evident that the date-line in their mind is the Council of Ephesus, and that they believe that it ushered in a new and incorrect tendency which proceeded to take destructive possession.

But they are totally misconstruing that event and its surrounding situation – to the extent of reversing the facts. It is senseless to suppose that everything new in the way of doctrine began from Ephesus. The council only put into the form of a definition something which the ordinary Catholic people had had in perfect perspective, but which certain innovators were trying to twist out of its original shape. It was the Nestorians who were the disturbers and who were condemned. It was the old belief which was defined and which continued.

Cardinal Newman gives us a list of saints from the first century up to Ephesus whose utterances on this subject would be identical with what would be said after Ephesus. St Augustine, addressing the Virgin, would typify them: 'He who made thee is made in thee.'

That belief was the primary Christian doctrine that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is but a single person and that Mary is the mother of that person. The shepherds saw things in that simplicity when on the first Christmas they hastened over to see the divine babe and his mother. So the Magi saw things at the end of their star-guided journey. And so did the apostles and the other companions of Our Lord. Mary was his mother; there was no confusion in the matter. They believed in Jesus as the Messiah and they enveloped his mother and himself in a common belief and love.

The early Christians did not reason out things as the modern Catholic theologians would. They saw the

position simply and they saw it accurately; the mother and her child, the promised pair through whom salvation had come. They never thought of drawing distinctions which would mean that Mary was not really the Mother of the Divine Redeemer.

The early years, when Christianity was at once growing and struggling for very existence, were not favourable for those minute speculations which are required for the full expanding of doctrine, and which on the other hand must necessarily suggest error. The process is good when the inspiration of the Church is recognised. Otherwise it will produce unending fissuring.

I suppose that it was the conversion of the Empire about 300 which really threw the Church into its problems. Its governors could appear without hindrance and set about their work of administration. The open proclaiming of the Faith brought with it the opportunity to criticise and to dissent. This tendency would be stimulated by the fact that the wind of official favour would waft into Christianity many elements which were not fervent and perhaps worse than that. So every day brought its new light and its new error, with corresponding need for correction by the Church. But where the sects deceive themselves is in supposing that this process of correction and development represented a deviation from the earlier perfection. In spite of their own myriad of contradictory opinions those sects claim – over a gap of one thousand years – to be the heirs of the ‘early purity of doctrine’. No, they mistake the position: they are not the inheritors of original truth but of the pruned-off false growths.

It was an idea of Cardinal Newman that every Christian doctrine, including those concerning Our Lord himself, has appeared to undergo a sort of magnification as

time went on. This might lead people without a proper historical background to think that things had changed, whereas there has been no change other than that of filling out, as a child would become an adult.

In other words the central idea of each Catholic doctrine was always there. New aspects may have presented themselves, and we are tempted to think that because we see a doctrine in fuller detail than the early Christians did, we see it better. I do not think that we would be justified in thinking so as a general proposition. The seeing of a doctrine in greater detail may not be a better seeing of it. For instance, does the modern Catholic who views Jesus in the light of all the protective and explanatory definitions of the Church see him any better than the early Christians saw him? If the pages of the gospel are closely read, they seem to show a faith in Jesus and an attitude towards him identical with what would proceed from the present-day Catholic.

Likewise, when one studies the pages of history which tell of the scenes of enthusiasm which attended the proclamation at Ephesus of Mary as the Mother of God, is one safe in supposing that we of today really appreciate her any better than did those rapturous lovers of hers fifteen hundred years ago? Forms may vary but the essence remains the same.

And this is not to say that Ephesus was the point of origin of that understanding love of her, as some people imagine. It is to be noted that the very cathedral in which that proclamation took place bore the name of Mary, proving that Ephesus inaugurated nothing new for the common believer. It only assured him that he was right. Mary in her completeness was there before Ephesus. How much before?

It was the first thought and teaching of apostolic Christianity that the Redemption reversed the Fall and reversed it in detail. Adam stood for Christ. Eve stood for Mary. All the circumstances were reproduced in Redemption with reverse action; that is restoring where the Fall had destroyed.

This teaching is of the first authority and is endorsed by the Church. Therefore, the relation of Eve to Adam is to be taken as an indication of the relation of Mary to Jesus. What was this?

Satan came to Eve and she believed in his word. She drew Adam into her sin and the human race fell: not in Eve but in Adam who was the head of humanity. After the Fall, Adam and Eve combined to have offspring through whom the original fault was passed on. It is important to be precise about Eve's part in order to see how it bears on Mary's place in the scheme of restoration. As said, mankind fell in Adam, not in Eve. If Eve alone sinned, mankind would not have fallen. But it is plain from scripture that only for Eve, Adam would not have sinned. She brought about his fall. This procedure is strangely reproduced in the case of Jesus and Mary. Man was not redeemed by Mary but by Christ. But this would not have taken place but for Mary. Her faith in Gabriel's announcement reversed Eve's faith in Satan's argument. She brought down Jesus from Heaven, just as Eve had brought down Adam in a different way. She inaugurated Redemption much as Eve had brought about the Fall. Mary's part was in strict proportion to Eve's.

Then Mary united with Jesus to bring forth a spiritual offspring – the Mystical Body. If her part in this is to be likewise proportionate to Eve's, then it has to be immense. For Eve's part in producing and bringing up children was

in quantity a greater part than Adam's. Adam generated the children, but Eve had most of the burden of them. It was her body that gave the child all its substance, and after that she had the absorbing duty of feeding and caring it. Adam was the head, but Eve had the direct care of the children. These circumstances would seem to be intended to indicate to us the place of Mary in Redemption. The race rose in Jesus and not in Mary, but Redemption would not have taken place except for Mary. Then if we apply Eve's function in the family to Mary, it would put Mary in precisely the same position that the doctrine of her mediation would, or that the True Devotion would. We belong to Mary as young children do to their mother, and we are utterly dependent on her. She does the housekeeping in the family of God. She administers the various graces which are equivalent to giving the innumerable cares that a mother lavishes on her children. Our Lord is the head and provides the elements of support which make family life possible, but he does it through the immediate agency of the mother.

The Adam and Eve parallelism with Jesus and Mary was taught from the first moment by the apostles. It is true that St Paul confines his references to Jesus as the New Adam. But to every hearer that would carry with it the thought of the New Eve. If it did not, then the brains of those early Christians were of a different sort to our own, because Adam and Eve are not merely successive thoughts; they are a single thought.

Then why did St Paul not name the New Eve as he did the New Adam? Because of the reverse with which the apostles and the early writers surrounded so many of the sacred things. Their special preoccupation was the bringing out in relief of the divine character and mission

of Jesus. Items which could be misunderstood in those purely pagan days, for example the Mass, the Eucharist, Our Lady, etc. were treated with that reserve.

The other great parallel placed before the early Christians to aid them to understand their relation to Christ and to each other was the comparison of the Church to the human body. Christ is the head of the Mystical Body and we are its members. The variety of roles is almost infinite, but one law governs all; dependence on Christ from whom flows the divine life which gives value to our acts. As in the human body, each member depends on and supports the others; and even the divine head depends on his members.

Where did the ancients place Mary in relation to that image of the body? I would imagine that it was simply as Mother of the Body that they regarded her, just as they thought of her as mother of the head. The idea of likening her to some organ of the body as Our Lord is compared to the head seems to date from the Middle Ages. St Bernard assigned to her the role of neck in the Mystical Body, and in this others followed him. Many did not consider this image as sufficiently expressive of her co-operative influence and have compared her to the heart. But all these ideas work down to the same thing: the effort to find images which would worthily show forth her secondary, but essential, place in the life of the Church. And this brings us back again to the New Eve doctrine, which is perhaps the most striking of all in its implications.

We call Mary the Mediatrix of All Graces. Jesus is the great Mediator or Accomplisher of Salvation. But his design has included Mary as his helpmate, although she is as nothing compared to him. He has incorporated her in his redemptive mission from beginning to end.

She has not any jurisdiction independent of his; she is totally dependent on him. But neither is she a mere mechanism; she is a responsible co-operator with his will. She fulfils faithfully the office which he has committed to her. Subject to him, she is also most perfectly united to him. She is fully mother; everything connected with the children of God is placed under her influence. She administers the divine life to them, and by her incessant maternal care she causes them to grow up in Christ. Her hand is on every item of the Christian life, every grace, prayer, duty.

That is her function. There she is as God intended her to be. Some, finding it hard to understand why 'He who is mighty has done those great things to her' (Lk 1:49), are unwilling to acquiesce. They prefer to leave her out of their philosophy. They forget that they must be amenable to God's philosophy. To them we could address a phrase of St Augustine: 'You run well, but you are off the road. Where will you get to in the end?'

On the degree to which we adapt ourselves to that arrangement of God will largely depend our life's work. Obviously then our first effort must be to seek to understand the greatness to which Mary has been appointed, and here the inspired treatise of de Montfort will be invaluable to us.

We must respond with some degree of adequacy to her mother-love. The True Devotion proposes a method. It is based on the principle that as we are placed by God in a relation to Mary which is equivalent to, but much more intense than, that of very young children towards their mother, we must behave to her accordingly. She gives to us everything she has. So we must give to her everything that we have. As we do not love or pray or work without

her help, we must try to realise this fact intellectually, so that specifically at some times, and indefinitely at all times, we will acknowledge her influence.

Some persons are held back from the True Devotion by the supposition that it requires them to address the bulk of their prayers to Mary. But the True Devotion is a state and not any particular prayers. Provided that Mary's sway over us is appreciated and occasionally brought to mind with deliberate advertence, we are free to direct our prayers where we will. It is that appreciation which is the pivotal element in the True Devotion.

De Montfort attaches large promises to the worthy practice of the Devotion. It would be nothing less than a supreme tragedy if he were to be imagined as exaggerating, because he does not exaggerate in the slightest way. The soul that Mary is enabled really to mother grows beneath her touch.