

How I Discovered De Montfort's True Devotion to Mary

By
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The author, Frank Duff, who founded the world-wide apostolate of the Legion of Mary in 1921, was 90 years of age when he wrote this article. He died the following year in November 1980. The Cause for his Beatification was opened in 1996.

Part I

SOMETIMES St. Louis de Montfort's True Devotion is viewed as a fad, but it is anything but that. The false idea is ministered to by the language of extreme devotion which is De Montfort's specialty. Sometimes he does appear to be speaking in terms of excess, but it is vital to recognize that there is no theological excess in his propositions. The notable fact that the new Holy Father should at the outset of his reign proclaim himself a follower of that devotion should be enough to demonstrate this.

However, the fact that so many do not take it up, and that many are found who are opposed to it, is evidence that it presents certain difficulties and that it has to be explained. Perhaps I am in a good position myself for attempting that task because every possible difficulty presented itself to me when originally I came in touch with De Montfort's book. I think that these obstacles would normally have prevailed but things of an unusual character peremptorily intervened to reverse the balance.

So perhaps you will bear with this preamble. Not all prefaces have utility but I think this one has. So I ask your patience while I plough through the tale of my original contact with the Book at the age of about twenty-nine. Until then I had not even so much as heard of De Montfort. The time was not long after the St. Vincent de Paul Society had acquired Myra House.

My First Contact

One evening I passed a group of the Brothers who were listening to one of their number talking. I stopped to listen and found that he had a book in his hands which he was animatedly discussing. It was the True Devotion. His description did not hold me but I did learn its name and its author. Although I did not realize it, that casual happening set off a chain-reaction of impulses of events which were destined to have important consequences for me. The first one came very shortly afterwards when I was looking through the shelves of one of the secondhand bookshops which at that time thronged the Quays, here in Dublin.

I spotted a copy of the "True Devotion" and as sufficient curiosity had been awakened in me by the account I had so recently listened to, I bought it for the sum of four old pence. It proved to be a find in another direction; it was the first English edition of the, "True Devotion" translated by Father Faber and printed in Dublin. I still have it. At once I proceeded to the reading of it. The result was a sort of crisis in me. I suppose that I would have regarded myself as having some devotion to Our Lady but it certainly did not surpass the dimension of the sentimental. It was what we were taught in the Catechism of the day. Mary was included in a general section on the Saints and we were told that it was "lawful" to be devout to her. In other words not a sin, a ludicrous description which would almost amount to placing it in the same category as betting on the horses or moderate drinking. With that grudging teaching it was remarkable that the popular attitude rose to what it did.

In my case I had not the degree of knowledge which would be necessary to absorb the “True Devotion”. Indeed it seemed to me to border on the absurd. But I did manage to persevere to the end. However I had had enough. I put it on a shelf and I do not think that I would ever have opened it again. My reading had created a prejudice against it.

A Friend Intervenes

But that was where the chain-effect came into play. Very shortly afterwards I made the acquaintance of Tom Fallon, a leading member of the St. Vincent de Paul Society, a prominent Civil Servant, and altogether a remarkable personage. He died in Mexico some years ago at the age of about ninety-six. He had served there as a Priest from the early 1920's, including the Obregon Persecution at its height.

A question which he very soon put to me was if I had read the “True Devotion”. My answer that I had, brought the further query: what did I think of it? Tom could be brusque in his manner and my reply that I had been unimpressed by the book brought down on me the suggestion that I had not read it with attention; that I had only skimmed through it. The book was a supreme classic in its field, necessary knowledge, and it was due to myself that I understand it.

So I took the “True Devotion” in hand again and went carefully through it. The result was the same as before. There was an abyss between what it set forth and what I possessed. I so reported to Tom Fallon.

I now regard it as strange that he did not seek to interrogate me in regard to the defects which bulked so big to me and which were not visible to him at all. How many times this performance was gone through of compelling a re-reading by me, I cannot precisely say. Let me put it at half a dozen times. No specific result seemed to emerge from each new reading, and yet each one appeared to have the quality of a step towards an objective. And that was exactly how things worked out.

I was engaged on the final forced reading when a sort of phenomenon accomplished itself. Without any process of thought leading up to it, something which I could but regard as a Divine favour was granted to me. It was the sudden realization that the Book was true. But why should this be? I did not understand things any more than I had previously. But there it was: a complete conviction that what I had been regarding as exaggerated and unreal was fully justified. That moment has remained in my mind with an absolute clarity. I have only to think of it and it stands before me in its original startling complexion. In that moment I knew that the Book was true.

Inadequate Knowledge

What effect had this upon me? Very roughly I would say that it was twofold. I saw that the fault was mainly in myself. I lacked a whole field of knowledge in regard to Our Lady which was necessary for the comprehending of her position as presented by the Saint. I would have to face up to the fact that I really knew nothing about her. The second part of this thought was that De Montfort was not writing for such as me but for a theologically educated class who possessed the foundation which the book required. He was presuming a knowledge of that foundation.

The point arises: Was Tom Fallon doing the same in regard to me? Was he making the mistake of supposing that I had the knowledge which would enable me to appreciate the Book? And could that be the reason why at no stage did he probe or argue with me as to why I was not attuned to the Book!

All these things thrashed around in my mind but finally settled into a peremptory conclusion. It was that I must get hold of the knowledge which De Montfort was presuming. In that stage things remained for a while. Not knowing exactly how to find what I wanted, I took no action.

But the action came. It imposed itself by virtue of the chain- reaction to which I have already referred. Perhaps it strikes a wrong note to say that it imposed itself on me. For when the transaction is analyzed I had in a sense earned the succession of links. I had followed up each one as it had presented itself. I had bought the book merely on the strength of hearing someone commend it to a group. I had then read it attentively. It was not my fault that I failed to get its message. When the next set of links, which were Tom Fallon's interventions, asserted themselves I yielded meekly in a manner which was not exactly typical of me. At the end of that particular series of links, perhaps it could be said that I had qualified to receive yet another impulse.

(Have I to point out that I was discovering for myself the procedure which the Legion calls "symbolic action" or the 39 steps? In difficulties, take a step in faith. This sets in motion a succession of them until the crowning one arrives.)

My next step was of a completely different type and in another field. As an act of helpfulness to a friend I paid my first visit to Mount Melleray. The next chain-reaction met me so to speak on the monastery doorstep. The Guest Master asked me if I would wish to have some book. "A book," I exclaimed, his question producing quite a shock in me. "Oh yes, I do particularly want a book, I want one on the theology of the Blessed Virgin, one which is deep enough to give me the fullness of her position but at the same time simple enough for me to understand." He promised to look around for such a book in their library.

"The Knowledge of Mary"

Soon after he came to me with a book. It was entitled "The Knowledge of Mary" and it was by a Father Joseph de Concilio. It contained three hundred pages and a first glance

through them suggested that it was rather deep. I started off at once on it. I had not gone far before I was seized with the same sort of excitement which had come to me when the “True Devotion” had suddenly revealed itself to me. Because de Concilio was the very thing that I was looking for. It was exactly for me. It was completely comprehensible but it was likewise most complete in what it taught on its subject. It began to unfold to me the entrancing but true eminence of the Woman on whom God had built His whole scheme from all eternity.

It was the perfect introduction to the “True Devotion”. Nothing better from my point of view could be conceived. As I went on, it filled every gap and met every difficulty which had troubled me. The light that it afforded was so suitable to me that I could not but look on the book as rather a wondrous gift. As I have said, it was another emotional and intellectual experience for me.

But a great apprehension flooded into me. I saw this book as essential to me. I would be able to get through it during my stay in the monastery. But would I remember it? As it seemed to me, I could not afford to run the chance of being parted from it. I must be able to study it and perhaps learn it off by heart. The title page told me that the book was published by a New York firm called Barclay, in 1878. This was ominous. Would I be able to secure a copy? Strange to say, the idea of asking the monastery for a loan of the book did not occur to me. I was unknown to the monks, and I felt that there would be some firm rule against lending books from their library to birds of passage like myself. I did not even think of asking.

I had recourse to a counsel of desperation. I began to copy out practically its entire contents. At this I worked late and long. As I was also rising very early for the first Masses, this copying task was an immense burden, but it was peremptory. I did not dare to risk being deprived of that treasure of knowledge. However the exhaustion of the performance was repaid by the fact that it helped to fix indelibly in my memory all the wonderful material that it offered. As a total transaction I have assigned in my Marian philosophy an equal rating to these two books, De Montfort and De Concilio. It took the second one to open the first to me, so that I have always thought of them as interdependent halves in this teaching operation which turned my life upside down.

I am not here contending that the study of a book like Concilio is now a necessary preliminary to the proper understanding of the “True Devotion”. I see very many persons around me take up the latter and read it with apparently a full appreciation. But this always puzzles me because not all of them have what I have been calling the foundation. Yet they eagerly receive the illuminated picture which St. Louis-Marie projects of Mary and they give it full play in their lives. I have to confess that I do not understand how this operates.

Handbook and “True Devotion”

For legionaries this whole problem hardly arises. The Handbook gives them the foundation in a simple form. Mary walks through its pages from the first to the last. The place assigned by God to her is adequately covered. In fact the Handbook can be

regarded as a simplified but all the same elevated summary of such a book as Concilio. Effort is made to include every phase of her being and to link it to aspects of the legionary apostolate so that they explain each other, and in such fashion that Mary becomes the motive for each item of the apostolate. This is achieved so sufficiently as to produce in the ordinary body of the legionaries a limitless generosity and a veritable heroism. What I hesitantly describe as the selector half of the Legion are certainly giving themselves in a princely manner. There would appear to be nothing of which they are not capable. One is tempted to apply widely to the Legion the valuation given to the Chinese legionaries by Cardinal Riberi, namely that their stature is that of the first Christians, nothing less.

Part II

FURTHERMORE it must not be thought that the cause of Our Lady is now so firm as to need no defenders. The opposite is the case, a most strange position having produced itself as a result of Vatican II. That body proposed as one of its principal aims to elevate common Mariological teaching to the point which the operations of the Legion had shown to be within the reach of the ordinary people. To that end it composed Chapter VIII of the *De Ecclesia* Decree which brought things up to the level which the Legion had been teaching its members, while at the same time not exceeding that level. This is intriguing as indicating that the Council considered that the Legion afforded a norm as to what the ordinary rank and file of the Church was capable of receiving.

Nevertheless, the unexpected sequel followed of a set-back in regard to Marian devotion. This is peculiar in view of the advanced teaching of Chapter VIII. It can only be explained by the fact that the Council had decided to substitute for a separate Decree on the subject of Our Lady a chapter in the Decree on the Church. A specious objection to this would be that a chapter is less than a Decree. Also one has to be more reserved in a general Decree in order to maintain due proportion. But the gain from being so emphatically set out as part of essential Church doctrine far outweighs the loss of separateness. Of course time will soon redress the balance. In the meantime the presence of the Legion in the field has assumed an added importance. It is the special custodian and propagator among the people of the correct role of Our Lady. For this reason the Legion must give special heed and prominence to the True Devotion as a sovereign means of maintaining its own spirit.

So far I have been speaking in general terms of the True Devotion, more of its quality as a proclamation about Mary than as a special devotion to her. But the Book declares its purpose to be the establishment of a system of devotion to her. It calls this the Slavery or total consecration to Our Lady. It is an anomaly that thereby the Book places certain difficulties in its own way. Many persons are alienated from the devotion and consecration by practices which the Saint recommends and for this reason turn away from the Book itself. This is unfortunate for every reason. A particular reason is that the essential of his Devotion does not consist in the things which those people recoil from but in its abiding spirit of unity and dependence on Our Lady.

Holy Slavery

The word "Slavery" evokes among some an irrational antipathy as if we were obliged to adopt the mentality of an earthly slavery. Also De Montfort's prescribing of the wearing of a chain to keep us in mind of our subjection to Our Lady stirs up dislike. I point out that if this attitude of sheer sentimentality were allowed to run away with things, it could tell with equivalent force against our use of the Crucifix. Why do not those objectors rail against it as introducing into our minds a disgraceful and out-of-date barbarism associated with vile criminals and their dire punishment? But it is for that very reason that we are devoted to the Crucifix; it makes vivid to us what Jesus took on Himself for our sake.

I repeat that the chains and penitential practices proposed by St. Louis-Marie are not essential to his Devotion. But certainly they cannot be ruled out as aids towards the acquiring of the central idea which is that of a realization of our total dependence on Mary, our Mother. God Himself has placed us in that condition and it extends to extremes far beyond our capacity to measure them. Slavery may seem to be a deprived state, but as the Handbook points out, it leaves the mind and soul free and is little in comparison with the extremity of union, dependence and love which we should endeavor to cultivate in ourselves towards our exquisite Queen and Mother. This is due from us as part of our ordinary Catholic state and not because St. Louis Marie de Montfort enjoins it. His position is that of reminding us that it is due from us, rather than of imposing it on us.

In that same sense that it is the inner spirit of the Devotion that counts more than the practices which are entailed, the very form of Consecration recommended by the True Devotion could be left out. But this would be going too far in the opposite direction and would risk in the end our slipping out of the Devotion altogether. We are composed of body and spirit, and each lives out of the other. Therefore the True Devotion for reality and permanence must possess some bodily or tangible form.

As to the taking on of the Devotion in some practical way, I could not speak too strongly. In the first place I have seen the Legion itself arise at the mere touch of De Montfort on an interested group. At once that band expanded into the Legion. Of course he must have been keeping a sort of vigil, awaiting that moment ever since he prophesied it more than two hundred years previously. "I look forward," he says, "to a great legion of brave and valued soldiers of Jesus and Mary, of both sexes" to combat the world, the devil and corrupted nature in those more than ever perilous times which are to come."

Montfort and the Legion

But the union between the Legion and the Saint went further than his breathing of life into it. He would have to continue to nurture it, and the Legion should of necessity admit its obligations to him. In a strange and potent fashion the Legion was enabled to do this. Though he had died in 1716 in the odour of sanctity, his Cause for Canonization lagged on the way and seemed to come to a standstill with his Beatification in 1888, by Leo XIII. But the spread of the Legion out over the world made him one of the most invoked Saints in the Church and supplied what had been the missing element, the popular estimation or *cultus*. And at once Rome acted. Not only was he Canonized in 1947 but his statue was placed in a lordly position in St. Peter's, prominent amongst the greatest ones.

A Page a Day

Now may I put the question: what is the best way to read his book and to practice his Devotion, for these operations must go together as a twin. I would be inclined to say that the very best method would lie in the reading of a page of the True Devotion every day, but in the manner of a prayer or meditation, seeking to drain the idea and spirit even of each word into our minds, accepting what it declares as a message to us from him; rejecting the notion that the very strong expressions which all the time proceed from his lips about the Blessed Virgin represent in the slightest degree unjustified embellishment of her. For there, I think, is the very charm and virtue of the book: that it can appear so often to be parting company from reality and plunging into a fantastic, extravagant world of its own. But beware when you find yourself imagining that such is the case. Because there is no exaggeration and no fantasy. No book ever passed through such an ordeal by fire and emerged so triumphantly as this one has.

Moreover Mary's vastness exceeds our capacity to exaggerate her. Our intelligence really cannot compass her. Necessarily God's masterpiece evades our full understanding so that when luminous glimpses are afforded to us we find the light too much.

So again I urge it. Read the book regularly in the spirit of complete acceptance. Dwell on its different parts. Capture its soaring ideas and receive them into yourself as by very faith. In this way will the real Mary show herself to you and be able to exert her full maternal sway over you. Thus will you make your passage through this life worthwhile, what it is supposed to be.