

The Apostles Of The Latter Times

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CARITAS - VERITAS

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This afternoon's talk is entitled THE APOSTLES OF THE LATTER TIMES.

More appropriately I'd like to title it:

IF YOU FOLLOW JESUS AND LOVE HIM AND HIS MOTHER, IS GOD ASKING YOU TO
BECOME ONE OF THE APOSTLES OF THE LATTER TIMES

It is partly a study of the life of St Louis Marie de Montfort and a look at both his life and his teaching. De Montfort was, as many of the saints were, somewhat of an eccentric. He became well known in his day for his attacks on Jansenism which was the dominant heresy at the time in France. The struggle with this heresy was so great that de Montfort's life was threatened by people whom he upset. He found his greatest following among the ordinary people and his greatest opposition among the clergy and bishops, many of whom had fallen under the influence of this heresy. But what St Louis is most famous for is a book entitled "True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary". In this book he outlines the role of Marian devotion in the modern world. De Montfort lived between 1673 and 1716 yet he wrote about the 'latter days'. For Catholic Christians the latter days have nothing to do with prophecies of the end of the world. The latter days began with the coming of the Messiah and they are the unfolding of God's plan of salvation down through the centuries until the end of the world. The end of the world may be in one minute, in which case you won't finish this pamphlet, or in 10,000 years.

When Louis had finished writing "True Devotion" he remarked, "I can see clearly that raging beasts will come in fury to tear in pieces this little book, or at least to bury it in the darkest silence of a coffer, so that it might not appear". This actually happened. Louis was both a prophet and a saint. Louis' treatise on True Devotion was hidden during the French Revolution and was only found again by one of the Montfort Fathers, the congregation that he founded, in 1862. The book has had tremendous influence on Catholic spirituality since that time.

St Louis was born in 1673 and he began his studies for the priesthood at the Seminary of Saint Sulpice in Paris, probably the most famous of the French seminaries. He began his studies in 1693 and was ordained on 5th June, 1700. He served under the Bishop of Poitiers for some time as a missionary and he attacked the Jansenist heresy and promoted Catholicism wherever he went. The storm that arose ultimately alienated the bishop from St Louis and he was forbidden to preach or hear confessions. So, being the type of person he was, who among other things wore a hair shirt and scourged himself, he set off on foot for Rome and approached Pope Clement XI. He received an appointment as a Missionary Apostolic which gave him the right to preach and hear confessions anywhere at all and effectively removed him from the power of the bishops. He founded a

congregation of priests and brothers called the Montfort Fathers and a congregation of nuns called the Daughters of Wisdom.

When it comes to study his famous work "True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary" we need to keep in mind that religious ideas are expressed in the language and ideas of the surrounding culture. De Montfort lived in a time when Kings and Queens still ruled, and there were very rigid social categories and structures. To ask the King or Queen for a favour you had to go to the next person above you on the social ladder, and he would pass on the request to higher authority, and so on. A petition to higher authority could be rejected if it was offered to the wrong person because it could be seen as being presumptuous. St Louis uses images of Heaven that are based on this model, so you get the idea that we pray to Mary, Mary has a word to Jesus, Jesus has a word to God the Father, and this is the most effective way of obtaining what one would wish for. Such a view of things meant a lot to people in his day.

In our day we would see it as more as a personal relationship and conversation with Mary, and this involving a three-way relationship with Jesus and the whole of the relationship leading us into a deeper relationship with God the Father. The Kingdom of God is a family which includes Heaven, Purgatory and the Church on Earth. We all participate, including Jesus and Mary, in the salvation of everyone else, as well as ourselves. We see Mary as participating in our relationship with God and leading us into a deeper relationship with God and other members of His Family. We do not see things in such a hierachial fashion as did the people of St Louis' day. So a correct understanding of the book "True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary" requires some understanding of its background and the times in which it was written.

Sometimes it is feared that devotion to Mary in the form of the rosary, scapulars, medals, pictures and processions may be excessive. However, there is little room in Anglo-Saxon Catholicism, as I have seen it, for any show of genuine warm devotion to Jesus. There are all too few opportunities for expressing devotion to Jesus either individually or as part of a group. This largely intellectual and elitist approach to devotion to Jesus does not attract the bulk of the people. In this type of atmosphere any form of devotion to Mary that involves the whole of the person, especially as a member of a group, can appear excessive. However, the truth is that Marian devotion needs to be renewed and intensified and made fully human, and that devotion to Jesus needs to be renewed and increased beyond the realms of anything that we can as yet imagine. Thus a true balance will be achieved.

Louis de Montfort was famous in "True Devotion" for teaching a form of Consecration of oneself to Mary. To consecrate oneself is to dedicate oneself, to put oneself at the disposal of another person, and to receive the love and protection of that person. The important thing in Louis' "True Devotion" is that it lead to a consecration to Mary that is total. You gave everything to Jesus through the hands of Mary. One authority says that it is an act of consecration to Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Wisdom by the hand of Mary.

The Mother of God Brothers use a somewhat fuller form of the act of consecration to Mary than that which was developed by de Montfort for his own use as far as the wording goes. It has essentially the same effect. I think one of the problems of our age is that we really don't expect God to do anything. I've met a number of people who pray to God when they're in trouble or difficulty because it is a last resort measure. It is like buying a new TV set and the instructions are in a bag stamped: "If all else fails, please read the instructions". The 'danger' of Acts of Consecration is that

they are taken seriously by God, and the person may find himself in the Front Lines under physical and spiritual enemy fire. You know there are angels around you, however not all of them may be angels of light

By God's decree, the freewill of man rules on earth; therefore the influence of God is felt through the freewill of man. For example. God became man when Mary agreed to co-operate in the incarnation of Christ. The devil is given play when people put their freewill at his disposal. So we don't have to go to Vietnam or Bosnia and Yugoslavia to get involved in spiritual warfare. You can do it right here. When you consecrate yourself to God through the hands of Mary, you offer yourself as an agent of Jesus Christ in His battle with Satan. The battle is real, the wounds are real, and sometimes the deaths are real. Certainly the least death we are all called to undergo is death to our own selfishness and pride.

This can be as painful, and as difficult, as any physical death. I suggest that we carefully read prayers before we use them, and I do not suggest this because I am superstitious. A religious Brother I know once told me: "The hymn Stabat Mater has 15 verses, but there are three to five that I never sing because I couldn't possibly mean them. I couldn't say that I want the wounds of Christ as He experienced them, to be experienced by me in my own body. That would be extremely painful. I want no such thing! If God wants it for me, I will try to accept it, but I am certainly not looking for it. So people who sing those verses are either extremely courageous and spiritual people, or they're treating the whole thing as a pious exercise, or simply fail to understand what they are actually saying. I would suggest that God is entitled to be taken a bit more seriously and treated with a bit more respect than that."

Since its publication in the eighteen sixties, "True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary" has gone through 238 editions and has been translated into at least 19 languages. St Louis de Montfort definitely sees these modern centuries as involving in a special way the Virgin Mary in the working out of man's salvation. With this in mind let us have a look at an Encyclical letter of His Holiness Pope Paul VI. It was issued on May 13th 1967 when the Pope went to Fatima, in his own words, as a simple pilgrim. He issued this letter to all the bishops of the Catholic world on that day. Its Latin name is "Signum Magnum" which translates "Great Sign".

The Holy Father has this to say in part of the Encyclical. 'From what we have been illustrating in the light of the holy Gospel and of the Catholic tradition, it appears evident that the spiritual motherhood of Mary transcends space and time and belongs to the universal history of the Church, since she has always been present in the Church with her maternal assistance. Likewise the meaning of the affirmation appears clear, which is so often repeated: our era may well be called the Marian era. In fact, if it is true that, by an exalted grace of the Lord, the providential role of the most holy Mary in the history of salvation has been more deeply understood by vast strata of the Christian people, this, however, should not lead us to believe that in past ages we had no intuition whatsoever of this truth or that future people will ignore it. In truth, all periods of the Church's history have benefited and will benefit from the maternal presence of the Mother of God because she will always remain indissolubly joined to the mystery of the Mystical Body of whose Head it was written "Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday and today, yes, and forever" (Heb. 13:8)' [Signum Magnum n 6].

We need to have a brief look at another prophetic event. Some Marian apparitions are quite outstanding. They obviously have God's seal of approval on them which is confirmed when the

Church officially endorses them as worthy of belief. This is particularly true of the six apparitions of the Virgin Mary to three Portuguese children from the 13th May to 13th October 1917 at Fatima.

The miracle of the sun on October 13th was foretold in advance for a set time and place. This is the first time in recorded history that this has happened. The miracle was seen by over 70,000 people, many of whom were non believers. Our Lady had said that the miracle would be worked "so that all may believe". Our Lady's words are still relevant to us today. On the July 13th visit Lucy asked her "What do you want of me?" and Our Lady said "I want you to come here on the 13th of next month. Continue to pray the Rosary every day, in honour of Our Lady in order to obtain peace for the world and the end of the war, (Word War I) because only she can obtain it". Lucy said "I want you to tell us who you are, and to perform a miracle so that everyone will believe that you have appeared to us." Our Lady said, "continue to come here every month. In October I will tell you who I am and what I want, and I will perform a miracle so that all may believe."

Lucy writes, "Here I made some requests which I cannot now recall. What I do remember is that Our Lady said it was necessary for those persons to say the Rosary in order to obtain the graces during the year. And She continued: "Sacrifice yourselves for sinners, and say often, especially when you make some sacrifice: 'O Jesus, this is for love of You, for the conversion of sinners, and in reparation for the sins committed against the Immaculate Heart of Mary'." Saying these last words, Our Lady opened her hands as She had done during the previous two months. The light from them seemed to penetrate the earth, and we saw a sea of fire. Plunged in this fire were demons and souls that looked like transparent embers, some black or bronze, in human form, driven about by the flames that issued from within themselves, together with clouds of smoke. They were falling on all sides, just as sparks cascade from great fires, without weight or equilibrium, amid cries of pain and despair which horrified us so that we trembled with fear. (It must have been this sight which caused me to cry out, as the people say they heard me exclaim aloud.) The demons could be distinguished by their likeness to terrible, loathsome and unknown animals, transparent as live coals.

"Terrified. we raised our eyes to Our Lady, who said to us kindly but sadly, "You have seen hell where the souls of poor sinners go. In order to save them God wishes to establish in the world devotion to my Immaculate Heart. If you do what I tell you, many souls will be saved, there will be peace. The war will end, but if men do not cease offending God, another and more terrible war will break out during the Pontificate of Pius XI. If my wishes are fulfilled. Russia will be converted and there will be peace. If not, Russia will spread her errors through the world, promoting wars and persecution of the Church. The good will be martyred, the Holy Father will have much to suffer, and various nations will be annihilated. But finally, my Immaculate Heart will triumph. The Holy Father will consecrate Russia to me and it will be converted, and a time of peace will be conceded to the world"." (see the appendix for some more reflections on Hell.)

In recent months as I speak in 1992, communism has collapsed in Europe, which none of us could have foretold a year or two before.

The consecration of the world to the Immaculate Heart of Mary was not meant to be a magical act, but an expression of our prayers and sacrifices. So while there are some grim remarks in that particular document written by Sr Lucy, the one of the three Fatima children still living [she died in 2005], it also points out that there is a spiritual war, and that prayer and sacrifice here can change what happens in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. The battle between good and evil is real, more real than tanks and guns. In early 1992 the Soviet Union still has an army of approximately 5

million, with a nuclear potential to destroy the world many times over, but it is posing no threat to anybody, at least for now. Catholicism, especially in its Eastern Rites, is now making great strides in Eastern Europe and Russia. Sufficiently so that many of the Orthodox bishops are quite upset with us for, in their terms, 'trespassing on their territory'. Given all they have been through, such super-sensitivity is at least, very understandable. I included the rather graphic illustration above to point out that what we sincerely do for God really does change things. God really does do things.

Prayer and sacrifice, offered to Jesus through the gentle hands of Mary, have the possibility of transforming countries and changing world history. Recent history shows the important role that the Virgin Mary has for mankind in these times. She has obtained the collapse of communism in Europe. By the way, making sacrifices does not only mean undergoing a physical discomfort; it can mean spending a day working for the St Vincent de Paul Society, or listening to some person in trouble. The more positive a sacrifice is, the better it is. Surely it is more beneficial to look after a solo mum's children for the afternoon to give her a break, than to just run around wearing a hair shirt and neglect the poor and down-trodden.

There is an infinite difference between the dignity of Jesus Christ, God and Man, and the Virgin Mary, who is a simple creature. God chose Mary to be the mother of Jesus Christ, the God man. This is a fact that all Christians accept - the dignity of Mary as the Mother of God is not an invention of the Catholic Church. The power that Jesus has chosen to put in the hands of the woman that he chose out of all creatures to be his own mother is demonstrated again and again in the history of mankind. So 'True Devotion to Mary' is simply respecting the wishes of Jesus as made known by Jesus Himself. The miracle of the sun at Fatima could not have taken place without direct divine intervention. Who was the instrument of these things happening? Mary was the instrument chosen by God to have a special part in these events taking place. We can only observe this to be true, and co-operate with it, and the consequences that flow from it.

The thing we need to do is to renew ourselves spiritually, to renew our devotion to Jesus as God and man, and our devotion to Mary as the specially chosen vessel of God. Personal and Church renewal are the essential themes of this talk.

This retreat is under the patronage of a number of saints but I would especially like to mention St Maximilian Kolbe because he used a lot of military analogies in his ideas and teaching. Defeat and victory depend on the purpose of the battle. After the defeat of France in the Second World War, Britain was left alone and largely defenceless. However, Fighter Command, which was almost destroyed in the process, inflicted such heavy losses on the German aircraft bombing England that the Germans gave up. The English said that they had won the Battle of Britain, because England was not under the heel of Nazi Germany. The invasion of England had been prevented but, in the process, the tripes had been bombed out of London, and Fighter Command had been hard hit. No German city had been seriously damaged, and the German air force was still superior to the British. But the British had held them off until the weather deteriorated and the Germans turned their attention to the east and to the fatal invasion of Russia. So while the Battle of Britain was won by the British, they sustained a high price. Many casualties are often the price of freedom. We have to look at that in terms of our struggle for victory.

Our struggle is for the salvation of souls. It is in working for the salvation of other people's souls that we shall secure the salvation of our own. The best way to grow as a Christian is to put our

emphasis and direction on the welfare of others and in doing so our own welfare will take care of itself.

Christianity is directly opposed to the values of our society: consumerism, materialism, and the worship of the goddess of pleasure in its various forms. Society at the present moment is suffering from a fatal disease and we need help to replace the present materialistic values of society with the values of Christianity, which are love of God and self-sacrificing love of our neighbour.

In this age of Mary, the Marian organizations are, like Fighter Command in the Battle of Britain, the front line organizations in the struggle against Satan and for the triumph of Christ's kingdom. That is why they have sustained such heavy damage in the last 40 or 50 years. However the price that has been paid by so many has achieved, among other things, the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. In this warfare, first of all has to come the love of God, dedication to God, the service of God, and dedication to Jesus, the God-Man. Then follows prayer, dedication to the Sacraments, particularly the Mass and reception of the glorified Christ in Holy Communion. Next comes love of the Virgin Mary and our co-operation with her and our identification with her.

Devotion to Mary is not a matter primarily of pious prayers or pictures or medals although, of course, these have their place. Marian devotion is primarily found in trying to imitate Mary's virtues and the development of a deeper personal relationship with her. If this is done, everything else will fall into place. If this is not done, you risk falling into superstition rather than true devotion.

Victory is certain. I think we should draw some consolation from the fact that in spiritual warfare you don't have to be physically fit, you don't have to be well, you don't have to be clever or learned. In terms of a military analogy, we may look like 'Dad's Army' and the opposition may well look like the victorious Germans pouring through France. But since the battle is spiritual, it takes place through prayer, the Sacraments, devotion to Jesus and Mary, and the service of our fellow man. 'Dad's Army' can do this just as well as the German War Machine.

Some of the saints mentioned during the Retreat had a strong devotion to St Michael the Archangel. I put this Booklet under his patronage and I commend you (the reader) to the love and protection of St Michael, the Prince of the Hosts of Heaven.

APPENDIX

REFLECTIONS ON HELL

These are only my personal reflections.

Firstly, I think Hell is not so much a place, but a state of being. I do not think the fire of Hell is so much a physical reality, but a symbol of the state of a person created with free will who has used that free will to abandon God forever. Fire is thought of as the cause of the greatest physical pain. Man is made for God and our hearts are restless until they rest in God. The eternal loss of God is the greatest disaster any person can experience. Hence the symbol of fire. Can Hell be squared with the idea of an infinitely loving God? What answer can be given by any merely human mind. But, as Scripture says: ' "My ways are not your ways, nor my thoughts your thoughts. As the heavens are high above the earth, so are my ways above your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts," says the Lord.'

C.S. Lewis has remarked, there are things that cause pain on earth that might cause joy in Heaven, and things that cause joy on earth that might cause agony in eternity. (See "The Problem of Pain" by

C.S. Lewis) The very, very, finite cannot fully understand the very, very, infinite. Is God a God of love in human terms? Yes. Does God sometimes seem, to some mere petty human minds, more like a monster, in human terms? Planet earth can only make sense when seen as a place where humans are invited, and sometimes forced, to choose between good and evil, again and again. As God says, "This day I lay before you the choice of life or death." Choose wisely! Does it seem fair that finite choices lead to eternal consequences? But who decides what's fair? In the final analysis it is simply impossible to put God on trial before the tribunal of finite human beings.

REFERENCES

The Jerusalem Bible True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary by St Louis Marie de Montfort The Complete Works of St. Teresa of Avila The Complete Works of St Therese of Lisieux; Especially The Autobiography of St. Therese of Lisieux The Collected Letters of St. Therese of Lisieux The Springs of Carmel (An Introduction to Carmelite Spirituality) by Peter Slattery, St. Paul Publications, 60-70 Broughton Rd., Homebush, N.S.W. 2140 [P.O. Box 906 Strathfield, N.S.W. 2135] (I found this book extremely helpful in the preparation of some of my Retreat talks. I find it very inspiring. I suggest you consider buying your own copy).

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