

Behold
Your
Mother

Priests Speak
about Mary

Edited by Stephen J. Rossetti

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At the School of the Mother: The Marian Spirituality of John Paul II

Rev. Anthony J. Figueiredo

“**A**fter God, I owe all to my mother. She was so good! Virtue passes readily from the heart of a mother into that of her children.”¹ As a seminarian and now as a priest, I have often pondered these words, spoken by the Curé of Ars, model and patron saint of parish priests. My mother bore me in the womb and defended my life from the first moment of conception. That was especially significant for me. It was the mid-1960s, a time when the drug thalidomide was being prescribed to help mothers sleep during pregnancy. Thalidomide left many newborns with shortened limbs. My mother’s doctors, knowing that I was to be born with some disability, counseled both my mother and my father to have an abortion. “How is it possible to raise a child whom you know will be handicapped? The burden, the time, the suffering. . . .” On the day of my ordination to

the priesthood, my parents recounted that event to me for the first time and the answer they gave the doctors: "If God has willed this child, then surely he has a marvelous plan!"

Long before I was taught the *Catechism*, my mother taught me my first prayers. Even without words, she trained me as I watched her receive Jesus in the holy Eucharist and return from the altar rails with reverence and gratitude. Each evening, my three siblings and I would kneel with her and my father around their bed to pray the rosary. How true are the words of Father Patrick Peyton: "The family that prays together, stays together." As a child growing up, I knew that the way to my father's heart was through my mother, for he would refuse her nothing. Then, much later in life and for many years, she insisted on caring at home for my bedridden father after acute diabetes, septicemia, a stroke and Parkinson's disease had robbed him of all his strength. Watching my mother, I understood the meaning of the vows spoken in the marriage between a man and a woman: "... for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health. . . ."

Karol Jozef Wojtyla was just one month short of his ninth birthday when he lost his mother, Emilia Kaczorowska. She was forty-five when kidney and heart problems led to her death in 1929. Later in life, he admits that his mother's contribution to his vocation "must have been great."² "Over this your white grave," he wrote poetically in the spring of 1939 at the age of nineteen when visiting his mother's tomb in Kraków, "the flowers of life in white. So many years without you, how many have passed out of sight? Over this your white grave, covered for years, there is a stir in the air, something uplifting and, like death, beyond comprehension. Over this your white grave, oh,

mother, can such loving cease? For all his filial adoration a prayer: Give her eternal peace."³

Karol turned to Mary to be his mother. From the shaping of Marian devotion in his early childhood to his final hours, when an image of the suffering Christ and a painting of the Blessed Mother hung near his bed in the papal apartment, and even in death, when a cross and the solitary letter "M" adorned his casket, the Blessed Mother never left him. At the age of thirty, the young Father Wojtyla wrote of Mary accompanying him in his final agony in a poem that was to become remarkably prophetic: "How attentive your stillness: it will always be part of me. I lift myself towards it, will one day grow so used to it that I will lay still, transparent as water vanishing into a dry riverbed, though my body will remain. Your disciples will come, and hear that my heartbeat has stopped."⁴

This maternal relationship was at the heart of Wojtyla's priestly vocation. Years later, as Pope, he would write, "On Calvary, Jesus entrusted a new motherhood to Mary when he said to her: 'Woman, behold, your son' (Jn 19:26). We cannot overlook the fact that when this motherhood was proclaimed, it was in regard to a 'priest,' the beloved disciple." According to the synoptic Gospels, the very night before Calvary, John received from Christ at the Last Supper the priesthood through the power to renew the sacrifice of the cross in the Eucharist: "Do this in memory of me" (Lk 22:19). With the other apostles, John belonged to the first group of priests; now, at Mary's side at the foot of the cross, he replaced the one supreme priest who was leaving the world. "Jesus' gaze," the Pope writes, "extended beyond John to the long series of his priests in every age until the end of the world. As he did for the beloved

disciple, he made that entrustment to Mary's motherhood for them in particular, taken one by one."⁵

At the same time, Jesus also said to John: "Behold, your mother" (Jn 19:27). To the beloved disciple and priest-apostle, he entrusted the task of caring for Mary as his own mother, of loving her, venerating her, and protecting her. "These words," the Pope writes, "are the origin of Marian devotion; the fact that they were addressed to a priest is significant. Can we not then draw the conclusion that the priest is charged with promoting and developing this devotion and that he is the one primarily responsible for it?"⁶

"From that hour, the disciple took her into his own home" (Jn 19:27). Like the apostle John on Golgotha, Pope John Paul II invites priests to take Mary "to our own home" or, even better translated, "into our own affairs," by allowing her to dwell "within the home of our sacramental priesthood." Our task, following the example of the Mother of God, is to generate and regenerate fallen man to share again the life of God. In this "*spiritual motherhood*," lived for priests in a manly way as a "*spiritual fatherhood*," Mary mothers us into mothering.⁷

Karol Wojtyla took Mary into everything about his life, and her indwelling wove what he calls the "Marian Thread"⁸ in his priestly vocation. There are at least four factors that formed that thread: (1) the Polish Marian shrines, (2) Vatican II, (3) personal suffering, and, above all, (4) the influence of Saint Louis Marie de Montfort. In each, we, too, as seminarians and priests can learn from Pope John Paul II how to take Mary as a Mother "into our own affairs."

The Polish Marian Shrines

From a young age, Karol Wojtyła worshipped at altars and shrines dedicated to the Blessed Mother. In his parish church of St. Mary at Wadowice, he recalled the chapel dedicated to Our Lady of Perpetual Help. He and other students would stop there before and after class to seek her intercession. On a hilltop in Wadowice, large numbers of the townsfolk would visit the Carmelite monastery. It was there, at the age of ten, that Karol received the scapular of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, which he wore into death. Even as a child, and still more as a priest and bishop, he would make frequent Marian pilgrimages to Kalwaria Zebrzydowska, the principal Marian shrine of the Archdiocese of Kraków, with its icon of Our Lady of the Angels. He would go there often, presenting to the Lord in prayer the struggles of the Church, especially against communism.

Czestochowa, too, the greatest Marian shrine in Poland, became a focal point in Wojtyła's life. In the fourteenth century, Prince Władysław brought to the mountain of Jasna Góra a Byzantine icon of Virgin and Child, reputed to have been painted by Saint Luke on a table belonging to the Holy Family, and he put it in the care of the monastery founded there by him. It was through the "Black Madonna's" maternal intercession, the Poles claim, that God gave them victory in a series of battles. Our Lady of Czestochowa, venerated for centuries as the Queen of Poland, thus came to represent Mary's special care for the Polish people, and especially protection against their enemies.

When Karol's mother died, his grieving father, the elder Karol Wojtyła, took him to the shrine. As a young actor, his

partner, Halina Królikiewicz, fell in love with him, but a mutual friend told her that Karol was already wedded to the Madonna at Czestochowa. As Archbishop of Kraków, he preached there often, seldom missing the great annual celebration of the Queenship of Mary. As Pope, he continued to pray the "Call of Jasna Góra," an evening prayer recited throughout Poland since 1954: "Mary, Mother of Poland, we are with you and we are mindful of your presence. Together with you, we keep vigil."

Scholastic theologians speak of the agility of the risen glorified body. By this, they imply that the body of a saint can move wherever the soul pleases. The dogma of the Assumption proclaims that Mary's body is risen in heaven. In her glorified flesh then, she enjoys a homely intimacy with her children in their mortal flesh. As a priest, I have made it my duty to make a pilgrimage, even of just one day, to a Marian shrine every year since my ordination. I have personally witnessed the maternal presence of Mary in places such as Jasna Góra, Lourdes, Fatima, Guadalupe, and Washington, D.C. "In all these places," Pope John Paul II testifies, "that unique testament of the crucified Lord is wonderfully actualized. In them man feels that he is entrusted and confided to Mary. He goes there in order to be with her, as with his Mother. He opens his heart to her and speaks to her about everything."⁹

Vatican II

In his first speech as Bishop of Rome on October 17, 1978, Pope John Paul II insisted that the primary duty of his pontificate would be to implement the norms and directives of the Second Vatican Council. He himself was

a bishop at the Council and he made several important interventions regarding Mary. In particular, he desired that Mary be presented at the Council in her maternal relationship to the Church. Mary had built up Christ's physical body as Mother, so she continues that role in the Mystical Body. Even though the section on Mary appears at the end of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church and not earlier as the then Archbishop Wojtyla had desired, his thought was explicitly supported by Pope Paul VI in his proclamation of Mary as "Mother of the Church" at the close of the Council's third session.

In his own pontificate, Pope John Paul II was able to elucidate his thought in two encyclicals written to coincide with the Marian Year from Pentecost 1987 to the Assumption 1988: *Redemptoris Mater* of March 25, 1987, and *Mulieris Dignitatem* of August 15, 1988, and in a series of seventy Wednesday-audience catecheses delivered between September 6, 1995, and November 12, 1997. In fidelity to the teaching of Vatican II, "motherhood" forms the underlying theme in the Pope's Mariology. From her *fiat* at the Annunciation, to her cooperation at the foot of the cross in the redemption wrought by Christ, through to her prayerful presence with the apostles awaiting the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, Mary unceasingly intercedes and cooperates as a mother in the spiritual birth and development of the sons and daughters of the Church (RM 44).

As priests, our closest relationship to a woman must be with this Mother, such that Mary becomes the mistress of our souls. "She is the longest relationship I have ever had," writes Saint John Vianney, and "she is much better still than the best of mothers."¹⁰ As at the wedding of Cana, seeing that "they have no wine" (Jn 2:3), the Mother of Jesus stands between her Son and us. The

same intercession and maternal mediation continue in heaven. She obtains for us every grace we need. Often in the course of the day—at Mass, in the rosary, in the Angelus, or at other moments—we need to pray: “Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us . . . *now*. . .” This “now” represents the particular grace we need at the present moment—for example, for chastity, for obedience, for zeal in our ministry. Blessed Teresa of Calcutta once told me that this is why I needed to pray to the Mother of Jesus. Does the Son ever refuse the request of his Mother?

Personal Suffering

Pope John Paul II’s life was marked by suffering. Even before he was born, his infant sister, Olga, died, bringing great grief to his parents and brother. Just three years after his mother’s death, his twenty-six-year-old brother, Edmund, a physician, died of scarlet fever, which he had contracted from one of his patients. Then came perhaps the greatest tragedy of all: the death of his father, whose example the future Pope would describe as “my first seminary.”¹¹ Kneeling beside his father’s body, he would recall, “I never felt so alone.”¹²

Karol himself was hit by a truck in 1944 while a college student. Thrown onto the curb, he hit his head and lay unconscious. By divine providence, a German military officer picked up the young man and made sure he was taken care of at the nearest hospital. As an adult, the former sportsman was beset by physical difficulties, including a broken thigh that led to femur-replacement surgery, the removal of a precancerous tube from his colon, and a fall that led to a dislocated shoulder. Then, on May 13, 1981,

the feast of Our Lady of Fatima, a bullet ripped into his stomach, right elbow, and left hand in St. Peter's Square. The Parkinson's disease that he later developed may well have been caused by the wounds. It is said that he missed death by a matter of millimeters. Even more remarkable are the x-rays that would reveal the trace of the bullet through the Pope's body, which formed the letter "M."

The Pope was to insert Alì Agca's assassination attempt within the "Marian thread" of his life: "This year, in a special way, after the attempt on my life, my conversation with Mary has been uninterrupted," he would later recount.¹³ There was no doubt in the Pope's mind that the hand of Our Lady had guided and deflected the bullet. On the first anniversary of the shooting, the Pope traveled as a pilgrim to Fatima in gratitude to Mary for saving him. In his homily, he referred to the "mysterious coincidence"—that the attempt on his life had occurred on the anniversary of the first Fatima apparition.

Pope John Paul II is rightly known as "Mary's Pope" or the "most Marian Pope in history." It is also fitting that, like the Sorrowful Mother, he becomes known as "a man of suffering, accustomed to infirmity" (Is 53:3) who never ran away from the cross. As priests, the cross in our lives can mean loneliness, rejection, ridicule, and unjust accusations. Like Mary, who carried the "second" annunciation that "you yourself a sword will pierce" (Lk 2:35) all the way to the cross, Pope John Paul II would sometimes say, "never climb down from the cross, for Jesus never did."

In my work as assistant to the Holy Father for six synods, I witnessed how the cross was transformed into grace in his very person, for the weaker he grew, the more people of every walk of life found in him a consoling "witness of hope." Is it not fascinating that the Pope, who

returned to the house of the Father on the feast of Divine Mercy, finishes his very last book, *Memory and Identity*, with the words from the prophet Isaiah: "By his stripes we are healed" (Is 53:5), imploring us to believe that "the limit imposed upon evil is Divine Mercy"?¹⁴ May we, too, trust that our fruitfulness as priests will come through fidelity to the words spoken on our ordination day: "Model your life on the cross of Christ."

Saint Louis Marie de Montfort

How can we sit "At the School of the Mother"? Pope John Paul II recommends a concrete way. As a clandestine seminarian working in the Solvay soda plant in Kraków, Karol Wojtyła took up his spiritual director's advice to meditate on Saint Louis Marie de Montfort's spiritual classic, *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*. "Many times and with great spiritual profit I read and reread this precious little ascetic book, with the blue, soda-stained cover," the Pope remembers.¹⁵ "The reading of the book was a decisive turning point in my life. . . . My devotion to Mary, modeled on this pattern, has lasted since then. It is an integral part of my inner life and my spiritual theology."¹⁶ Indeed, in the Pope's episcopal arms, the motto *Totus tuus* takes its inspiration from the teaching of St. Louis Marie de Montfort. These words express total belonging to Jesus through Mary: "*Tuus totus ego sum, et omnia mea tua sunt,*" writes the saint, which he translates: "I am all yours and all I have is yours, O dear Jesus, through Mary, your holy Mother."¹⁷

One cannot understand Pope John Paul II's total gift of self without knowing something of the life and

spirituality of Saint Louis Marie. In his first year after ordination, Father Louis Marie wrote to his spiritual director, describing his vocational objectives: “I feel a great desire to make Our Lord and His Holy Mother loved, and to go about in a poor and simple way, catechizing poor country people.” In a life rooted in constant prayer, love of the poor, poverty carried to an unheard-of degree, and joy in humiliations and persecutions, this secular priest would spend his sixteen years in the Lord’s vineyard doing just that, exhorting his own priests to preach with simplicity, truthfulness, without fear, and with charity, adding, “His intention must be holy and centered on God alone. God’s glory must be his sole preoccupation, and he must first practice what he preaches.”¹⁸

As a young man, Karol Wojtyla would discover through the saint’s writing that the purpose of sound devotion to the Blessed Mother is to establish devotion to Jesus Christ more perfectly. Saint Louis Marie asserts that, when we give ourselves entirely into the maternal hands of Mary, she provides “a smooth but certain way of reaching Jesus Christ.”¹⁹ She is the one member of the human race who cooperated perfectly with God’s grace. Satan, therefore, dreads her. For the Christian, the baptismal rejection of Satan and all his empty promises can be renewed in, with, and through Mary’s maternal intercession, leading to an act of living faith in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

For a priest, these two ends of Saint Louis Marie’s “Consecration of Oneself to Jesus Christ, Eternal Wisdom, through the Blessed Virgin Mary”—death to sin and union with the life of the Blessed Trinity—are lived in very concrete ways. Death to sin involves the regular and sincere confession of sins, and careful practice of spiritual direction. As priests, we are led into union with the life of the

Blessed Trinity in a unique way through the Eucharist. Like the Mother of Jesus at the foot of the cross, each day at the altar we join our body to Jesus' sacrifice on Calvary for the redemption of the world: "This is my body, which will be given for you" (Lk 22:19). How important it is for us priests every day to celebrate the Eucharist and gaze upon the littleness and humility of Jesus in Eucharistic adoration.

But, above all, we need desire. Very early on in my priesthood, when I was experiencing a time of dryness, I asked Blessed Teresa of Calcutta personally: "How can I be holy?"

Her response has never left me. "If you have the desire," she told me, "God will do the rest." I may have achieved much in worldly terms through desire. But do I have the *desire to be holy*?

Let us sit at the school of Mary, our Mother, for she is the mold in which Jesus forms his saints. Pope John Paul II is living proof. St. Louis Marie's description of the "true Apostles of the latter times" fits our beloved Holy Father so well that I cannot but close with it, praying that just as Jesus had the humility to come to us through Mary, we may come to Jesus through Mary:

But what will they be like, these servants, these slaves, these children of Mary?

They will be ministers of the Lord who, like a flaming fire, will enkindle everywhere the fires of divine love. They will become in Mary's powerful hands, like sharp arrows, with which she will transfix her enemies.

They will be as children of Levi, thoroughly purified by the fire of great tribulations and closely joined to God. They will carry the gold of love in their heart, the frankincense of prayer in their mind and the myrrh of mortification in their body. They will bring to the poor and the lowly everywhere the sweet fragrance of Jesus. . . .

They will be true apostles of the latter times to whom the Lord of Hosts will give eloquence and strength to work wonders and carry off glorious spoils from his enemies. They will sleep without gold or silver and, more important still, without concern, in the midst of other priests, ecclesiastics and clerics. Yet they will have the silver wings of the dove enabling them to go wherever the Holy Spirit calls them, filled as they are with the resolve to seek the glory of God and the salvation of souls. . . .

Lastly, we know they will be true disciples of Jesus Christ, imitating his poverty, his humility, his contempt of the world and his love. . . . They will have the two-edged sword of the Word of God in their mouths and the blood-stained standard of the cross on their shoulders. They will carry the crucifix in the right hand and the rosary in their left, and the holy name of Jesus and Mary on their heart. The simplicity and self-sacrifice of Jesus will be reflected in their whole behavior.

Such are the great men who are to come. By the will of God Mary is to prepare them to extend his rule over the impious and unbelievers. But when and how will this come about? Only God knows. For our part we must yearn and wait for it in silence and prayer: "I have waited and waited."²⁰