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MARY: EXEMPLAR OF FAITHFUL LOVE FOR VIRGINS, SPOUSES, MOTHERS, AND THE CHURCH

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INTRODUCTION: JOHN PAUL II AS “MARY’S POPE”

John Paul II (1920–2005) has been rightly called “Mary’s Pope.”¹ It is not an accident that a Roman Pontiff so devoted to the Mother of God should also be committed in a special way to the dignity of women. The apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* was issued on August 15, 1988, the Solemnity of Mary’s Assumption, near the close of the Marian Year.² This special year, dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, was announced on the Solemnity of the Annunciation, March 25, 1987, by means of John Paul II’s encyclical *Redemptoris Mater*.³

It is no secret that Mary played a special role in John Paul II’s pontificate (1978–2005). His papal motto, *totus tuus* (entirely yours), comes from a prayer of St. Louis-Marie Grignion de Montfort (1673–1716), one of the most important Marian theologians in Catholic history.⁴ The phrase *totus tuus* appears in several places in

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1. ANTOINE NACHEF, *MARY’S POPE: JOHN PAUL II, MARY, AND THE CHURCH SINCE VATICAN II* (2000).

2. Pope John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* [*Apostolic Letter on the Dignity and Vocation of Women*] ¶ 21 (1988) [hereinafter *Mulieris Dignitatem*].

3. Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater* [*Encyclical Letter on the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Life of the Pilgrim Church*] ¶ 48 (1987) [hereinafter *Redemptoris Mater*].

4. Pope John Paul II takes his papal motto from a Latin prayer written by St. Louis de Montfort: *Tuus totus ego sum, et omnia mea tua sunt, O Virgo super omnia benedicta*. *OEUVRES COMPLÈTES DE SAINT LOUIS-MARIE GRIGNION DE MONTFORT* 839 (1982); St. Louis Marie de Montfort, *The Little Crown of the Blessed Virgin*, in *GOD ALONE: THE COLLECTED WRITINGS OF ST. LOUIS MARIE DE MONTFORT* 515 (J. Patrick Gaffney ed., 1995) (providing this English translation of the prayer: “I belong to you entirely, and all that I possess is yours, Virgin blessed above all.”).

Montfort's work. Explaining that complete consecration to Mary is the most perfect consecration to Jesus, St. Louis de Montfort writes that true devotion to Mary "consists in giving oneself entirely to Mary in order to belong entirely to Jesus through her."⁵ As one can see, true devotion to Mary is intended to lead one closer to Jesus, her Son. This is even more clearly expressed in another passage of St. Louis de Montfort's *True Devotion to Mary*, which provides this short prayer of consecration: "I am all yours and all I have is yours, O dear Jesus, through Mary, your holy Mother."⁶ In *Redemptoris Mater*, John Paul II points to St. Louis de Montfort as one "who proposes consecration to Christ through the hands of Mary, as an effective means for Christians to live faithfully their baptismal commitments."⁷

In many ways, the Blessed Virgin Mary was at the heart of John Paul II's pontificate. He himself believed that Mary provided special protection from the bullet of the would-be-assassin Mehmet Ali Agca on May 13, 1981, the Feast of Our Lady of Fatima.⁸ This bullet was later set in the Crown of Our Lady of Fatima in 1994.⁹ In his final encyclical, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, John Paul II exhorted the faithful to enter into Eucharistic contemplation through the "school of Mary."¹⁰

In what follows, I try to show the profound link between the dignity of women and the Blessed Virgin Mary in John Paul II's thoughts. First, I describe the theological foundations of Mary as exemplar. This leads naturally to a discussion of Mary as the exemplar of faithful love for consecrated virgins. I then show how Mary is the exemplar of faithful love not only for consecrated virgins, but also for spouses, mothers, and the Church herself. Finally, I conclude with the social applications of this idea.

5. ST. LOUIS DE MONTFORT, TRUE DEVOTION TO MARY, *reprinted in* GOD ALONE: THE COLLECTED WRITINGS OF ST. LOUIS MARIE DE MONTFORT, *supra* note 4, at 327.

6. *Id.* at 364; *see also id.* at 393 n.415 ("Tuus totus ego sum, et omnia mea tua sunt. Formula taken from ST. BONAVENTURE . . .").

7. *Redemptoris Mater*, *supra* note 3, ¶ 48.

8. Pope John Paul II, Address at the Chapel of Apparitions in Fatima, Port. (May 12, 1982), *in I Have Arrived at Fatima, a Pilgrim, in the Spirit of Prayer and Penance*, L'OSSERVATORE ROMANO (English ed.), May 31, 1982, at 8. *See generally* GEORGE WEIGEL, WITNESS TO HOPE 411–14, 422–25, 440 (1999).

9. Cardinal Angelo Sodano, Announcement at the Basilica of Our Lady of the Rosary in Fatima (May 13, 2000), *in Third Part of Secret To Be Published*, L'OSSERVATORE ROMANO (English ed.), May 17, 2000, at 2.

10. *See* Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* [Encyclical Letter on the Eucharist in Its Relationship to the Church] ¶ 7 (2003) (emphasis omitted).

I. THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF MARY AS EXEMPLAR

John Paul II was acutely aware of the centrality of Mary to the Christian faith. In this he was building on the insight of his predecessor, Paul VI, who, in a homily given in 1970 at the Marian shrine of Our Lady of Bonaria in Cagliari, Sardinia, stated, "If we want to be Christian, we must also be Marian, that is we must recognize the essential, vital, providential bond which unites our Lady with Jesus and which opens to us the way that leads us to him."¹¹ In a similar way, John Paul recognized "*the exceptional link between this 'woman' and the whole human family.*"¹² This exceptional link helps to explain why Mary is the exemplar of faithful love. The following theological foundations are also important.

A. *Mary Expresses the Finality of Human Existence*

Mary embodies the finality of human existence realized "*in the supernatural elevation to union with God* in Jesus Christ, which determines the ultimate finality of the existence of every person both on earth and in eternity."¹³ Mary "is the representative and the archetype of the whole human race: she *represents the humanity* which belongs to all human beings, both men and women."¹⁴ This point corresponds to the insight of St. Thomas Aquinas: "Through the Annunciation, the consent of the Virgin was awaited in the name of all human nature."¹⁵ Mary is she "who did so ennoble human nature that its Creator did not disdain to become its creature."¹⁶

11. Pope Paul VI, Address to the Executive Council of the World Movement of Christian Workers (Apr. 8, 1970), in 62 ACTA APOSTOLICAE SEDIS 295, 300-01 (1970).

12. *Mulieris Dignitatem*, supra note 2, ¶ 2; see also *Redemptoris Mater*, supra note 3, ¶¶ 7-11 (discussing Mary's special and unique role in seeking salvation through Christ).

13. *Mulieris Dignitatem*, supra note 2, ¶ 4.

14. *Id.*

15. SANTI THOMAE DE AQUINO, SUMMA THEOLOGICA, Pt. III, Q. 30, Art. 1 (Rome, Opera Iussu Leonis XIII P.M. Edita 1894) [hereinafter SUMMA THEOLOGICA] ("*[P]er annuntiationem expetabatur consensus Virginis loco totius humanae naturae . . .*").

16. DANTE ALIGHIERI, PARADISO, Canto XXXIII, ll. 4-6, in LA DIVINA COMMEDIA 481, 690 (Enricho Bianchi ed., A. Salani 1938) [hereinafter DANTE, PARADISO]. ("*[Vergine Madre,] tu se' colei che l'umana natura / nobilitasti sì, che 'l suo fattore / non disdegnò di farsi sua fattura*").

B. *Mary's Union with God Is Due to Grace*

Mary's intimate union with God is a result of "pure grace," but "through her response of faith Mary exercises her free will and thus fully shares with her personal and feminine 'I' in the event of the Incarnation."¹⁷ Mary thus becomes the supreme example of human nature transformed by grace but fully free. According to Catholic theology, grace does not take away human freedom, but perfects it.¹⁸ Mary is the most illustrious example of this principle.

C. *Mary's Fiat Is the Gift of Herself*

Mary gives herself totally to God in her *fiat* at the Annunciation. She makes a sincere gift of herself to God.¹⁹ Mary "discovers herself by means of a sincere gift of self."²⁰ By her total gift of herself to God in love and service, Mary becomes the exemplar of human love as self-donation and interpersonal communion.²¹ Mary, therefore, expresses perfectly the teaching of Vatican II: human beings truly find themselves only when they make a sincere gift of themselves.²²

D. *Mary Is the Exemplar of Holiness*

John Paul II teaches that Mary holds first place in "the hierarchy of holiness."²³ She embodies the perfection of human virtue, grace, and love, and thus becomes an eschatological sign of hope for the Church.²⁴ This was the teaching of Dante. In speaking of Mary, he writes, "In thee is compassion; in thee, mercy; in thee, magnificence; in thee is assembled everything in the creature there is of goodness."²⁵

17. *Mulieris Dignitatem*, *supra* note 2, ¶ 4.

18. See SUMMA THEOLOGICA, *supra* note 15, Pt. I, Q. 1, Art. 8.

19. *Mulieris Dignitatem*, *supra* note 2, ¶ 4.

20. *Id.* ¶ 11 (internal quotation marks omitted).

21. See *id.* ¶¶ 5, 7.

22. See Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* [*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*] ¶ 24 (1965), reprinted in THE SIXTEEN DOCUMENTS OF VATICAN II 513, 536 (Nat'l Catholic Welfare Conference trans., 1967) [hereinafter *Gaudium et Spes*].

23. *Mulieris Dignitatem*, *supra* note 2, ¶ 27.

24. *Id.*; see also Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* [*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*] ¶ 65 (1965), reprinted in THE SIXTEEN DOCUMENTS OF VATICAN II, *supra* note 22, at 107, 175 [hereinafter *Lumen Gentium*].

25. DANTE, PARADISO, *supra* note 16, Canto XXXIII, ll. 19–21, at 691 ("In te misericordia, in te pietate, / in te magnificenza, in te s'aduna / quantunque in creatura è di bontate.").

II. MARY IS THE EXEMPLAR OF FAITHFUL LOVE FOR VIRGINS

We now turn to Mary as the exemplar of faithful love for the various states of life. In a preeminent way, Mary is the exemplar of faithful love for virgins. John Paul II teaches that the consecration of virgins is not only an eschatological sign but also an expression of the “spousal” gift of oneself to Christ.²⁶ Virgins also embody motherhood “according to the Spirit,”²⁷ and they find in Mary an exemplar of virginal, spousal love and spiritual motherhood, since Mary is the spiritual mother of all Christians.²⁸ Mary represents the perfect virginal love by “*her total self-giving to God in virginity.*”²⁹

III. MARY IS THE EXEMPLAR OF FAITHFUL LOVE FOR SPOUSES

Mary’s consent to be the Mother of God is “guided by spousal love, the love which totally ‘consecrates’ a human being to God.”³⁰ Going back to the Fathers of the Church (for example, St. Ephrem the Syrian (c. 306–373) and St. Gregory Nazianzen (c. 329–390)), there is a long tradition of understanding Mary as the “spouse of God” in a mystical, spiritual sense.³¹ In his prayer for the Marian Year, John Paul II says of Mary, “The Holy Spirit loved you as his mystical spouse”³² In her mystical espousal to God, Mary gives herself totally in faithful love. She said “yes” to all God asked of her, including the sword that would pierce her heart³³ and the Passion of her Son.³⁴ Mary was also united to St. Joseph, the just man, “by a bond of marital and virginal love.”³⁵

26. *Mulieris Dignitatem*, *supra* note 2, ¶ 20.

27. *Id.* ¶ 21 (emphasis omitted) (citing *Romans* 8:4).

28. *Id.* ¶ 22.

29. *Redemptoris Mater*, *supra* note 3, ¶ 39.

30. *Id.*

31. See LUIGI GAMBERO, *MARY AND THE FATHERS OF THE CHURCH* 117–18, 167 (Thomas Buffer trans., 1991); MICHAEL O’CARROLL, C.S.SP., *THEOTOKOS: A THEOLOGICAL ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY* 333–34 (rev. ed. with supp. 1983).

32. Pope John Paul II, *Our Lady of the Millennium, Mother of the Redeemer* (June 6, 1987), in *THE PRIVATE PRAYERS OF POPE JOHN PAUL II* 102, 102 (2005).

33. See *Luke* 2:35.

34. *Mulieris Dignitatem*, *supra* note 2, ¶ 19.

35. Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Custos* [*Apostolic Exhortation on the Person and Mission of Saint Joseph in the Life of Christ and of the Church*] ¶ 20 (1989) (internal quotation marks omitted) (quoting Misso de Sancta Maria de Nazareth, Praefatio, in *COLLECTION MISSARUM DE BEATA MARIA VIRGIE* (1987)).

Mary and St. Joseph shared a mutual spiritual love in service to the call God gave them. According to St. Augustine, Mary's marriage to Joseph was marked by the three goods of marriage: offspring, fidelity, and sacrament.³⁶ As one who embodies spousal love that is total, faithful, and fruitful, Mary serves as an exemplar and an advocate for spouses. Marital, spousal love is sacramental and indissoluble, and Mary serves as the model of covenantal love that is holy and faithful, even in the midst of suffering.

IV. MARY IS THE EXEMPLAR OF FAITHFUL LOVE FOR MOTHERS

John Paul II points to "virginity and motherhood as two particular dimensions of the fulfillment of the female personality," and these "acquire their full meaning and value in Mary."³⁷ Motherhood involves "a special openness" on the part of a woman, a gift of "interior readiness to accept the child and bring it into the world."³⁸ Eve's joy and wonder expressed by the words, "*I have brought a man into being with the help of the Lord*" . . . is repeated every time a new human being comes into the world.³⁹ Motherhood, also, according to John Paul II, "*is linked to the personal structure of the woman and to the personal dimension of the gift.*"⁴⁰

Mary serves as the exemplar of motherhood because her *fiat* at the Annunciation signifies "the woman's readiness for the gift of self and her readiness to accept a new life."⁴¹ Mary embodies the special dimension of motherhood as covenant, and "[e]ach and every time that *motherhood* is repeated in human history, it is always *related to the Covenant* which God established with the human race through the motherhood of the Mother of God."⁴² As Mary made a covenant with God in saying "yes" to become the Mother of the Incarnate Word, human mothers must say "yes" to God when they discover that a new life has begun within their wombs. Mary accepted all the self-sacrifice that motherhood entails, and she accepted this all in love.

36. ST. AUGUSTINE, AGAINST JULIAN, Bk. V, Ch. 12 (Hermigild Dressler, O.F.M. et al. eds., Matthew A. Schumaker, C.S.C. trans., Fathers of the Church Series No. 35, 1957).

37. *Mulieris Dignitatem*, *supra* note 2, ¶ 17.

38. *Id.* ¶ 18.

39. *Mulieris Dignitatem*, *supra* note 2, ¶ 18 (quoting *Genesis* 4:1).

40. *Id.*

41. *Id.*

42. *Id.* ¶ 19.

V. MARY IS THE EXEMPLAR OF FAITHFUL LOVE FOR THE CHURCH

Mary is described as the “type” or “figure” of the Church (*Ecclesiae typus*) in *Lumen Gentium*.⁴³ In Mary’s person, “the Church has already reached that perfection whereby she is without spot or wrinkle.”⁴⁴ Mary represents the holiness and fidelity that all members of the Church must seek. The Holy Spirit, as the soul of the Church, enables her to remain a faithful bride, even though individual members of the Church may fail in fidelity.

VI. SOCIAL APPLICATIONS

John Paul II recognizes the tragic effects of sin on marriages, family life, and women.⁴⁵ As the New Eve, Mary represents the new humanity redeemed by Christ and elevated by grace.⁴⁶ Mary is “our mother in the order of grace.”⁴⁷ She is the exemplar of faithful love for all Christians, and she points the way to Christ, who is Love Incarnate.⁴⁸

What are the social applications of Mary as the exemplar of faithful love? According to the National Center for Health Statistics of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 10.7% of U.S. children were born to unmarried mothers in 1970; by 2002, this figure had gone up to 34% for all races and 68.2% for African-Americans.⁴⁹ While many of these unwed mothers exhibit heroic virtue in raising their offspring without husbands, there is much empirical evidence that demonstrates the importance of marriage for the raising of children.⁵⁰

Much harm is done to individuals and the common good when sexual relations are separated from fidelity and marriage. The Church teaches that:

43. *Lumen Gentium*, *supra* note 24, ¶ 63.

44. *Id.* ¶ 65; *Ephesians* 5:27.

45. See *Mulieris Dignitatem*, *supra* note 2, ¶¶ 9–10.

46. *Id.* ¶ 11.

47. *Lumen Gentium*, *supra* note 24, ¶ 61.

48. Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* [*Encyclical Letter on Christian Love*] ¶ 12 (2005).

49. See *THE WORLD ALMANAC AND BOOK OF FACTS* 181 (William A. McGeeveran Jr. ed., 2006).

50. See *INST. FOR AM. VALUES, WHY MARRIAGE MATTERS: TWENTY-SIX CONCLUSIONS FROM THE SOCIAL SCIENCES* 10–11 (2d ed. 2005).

By its very nature conjugal love requires the inviolable fidelity of the spouses. This is the consequence of the gift of themselves which they make to each other. Love seeks to be definitive; it cannot be an arrangement “until further notice.” The “intimate union of marriage, as a mutual giving of two persons, and the good of the children, demand total fidelity from the spouses and require an unbreakable union between them.”⁵¹

The sexual union is an embodied expression of faithful love, and faithful love is a privileged expression of human dignity and social cohesion. The deepest expressions of human love require complete fidelity or faithfulness. This is true for consecrated virgins, spouses, and mothers; and Mary, as we have seen, is the exemplar for all of these groups.

It might be objected that Mary is not a realistic model for women of today. After all, how many women are both virgins and mothers? How many women can claim to be preserved from original sin from the first instant of their conception? An exemplar, however, is more than a model. An exemplar is also an ideal, an archetype, or a paradigm. Christians are called to follow the example of Jesus⁵² and to follow his path of sacrificial love.⁵³ Jesus, though, is the Incarnate Word of God. If Jesus holds himself up as an exemplar, there should be no objection to having Mary as an exemplar of faithful love.

Mary, though, is more than a woman who lived in the past. She is a heavenly Mother, and “[b]y her maternal charity, she cares for the brethren of her Son, who still journey on earth surrounded by dangers and difficulties.”⁵⁴ Mary is “our mother in the order of grace.”⁵⁵ She intercedes for us and helps us be faithful in love according to our state of life. The great Jesuit Francisco Suárez (1548–1617) explains that we should pray to Mary “so that the dignity of the intercessor may make up for our deficiency.”⁵⁶

51. CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH ¶ 1646 (2d ed. 1997) (quoting *Gaudium et Spes*, *supra* note 22, ¶ 48); *see also* ROBERT L. FASTIGGI, WHAT THE CHURCH TEACHES ABOUT SEX: GOD’S PLAN FOR HUMAN HAPPINESS 15 (2009).

52. *See John* 15:13.

53. *See Mark* 8:34.

54. *Lumen Gentium*, *supra* note 24, ¶ 62.

55. *Id.* ¶ 61.

56. FRANCISCO SUÁREZ, COMMENTARII ET DISPUTATIONES, Disp. XXIII, § 3, ¶ 4, in 19 OPERA OMNIA 1, 336 (Ludovicum Vivès ed., Paris, A. Carlo Berton Berton, Nova ed. 1860) (“[U]t dignitas intercessoris suppleat inopiam nostrum, unde Virginem interpellare, non est de divina misericordia diffidere, sed de propria indignitate et indispositione timere.”)

CONCLUSION

In North America and in many other places, human relations are deeply injured by failures in fidelity on the part of spouses, mothers, and fathers. The world today needs Mary as an exemplar of faithful love and a heavenly intercessor. Social science can only go so far in explaining the reasons for breakdowns in commitments and the lack of fidelity on the part of spouses and parents. Most human failures can be traced to failures to love. Social ills often are spiritual in nature. This is why faith should not be separated from the public domain. Human relations are sustained by faithful love, and the witness of consecrated virgins and faithful spouses is so greatly needed.

John Paul II understood human failure and how social evils transcend political and psychological explanations. He witnessed the evil effects of the Nazi and Communist regimes. His faith was sustained by his love for Mary, who brought him closer to the Sacred Heart of her divine Son. By upholding the dignity of Mary, John Paul II upheld the dignity of women throughout the world. Mary, though, recognized that God was the one who had done "great things" for her.⁵⁷ But almighty God entered into human history through her free cooperation. This is why there is a woman at the center of salvation history, and the woman's name is Mary. She was the one "who did so ennobles human nature that its Creator did not disdain to become its creature."⁵⁸ Knowing that Mary played and continues to play such an important role in God's plan of salvation, Christians must be at the forefront in defending the dignity of women.

57. *Luke 1:49* (Revised Standard, Catholic Edition) (internal quotation marks omitted).

58. DANTE, *PARADISO*, *supra* note 16, Canto XXXIII, ll. 4-6.