

## **A Dominican looks at MARY, MOTHER OF THE EUCHARIST**

For the first time this year, the liturgical calendar extended to the universal Church, the feasts of St Louis Mary Grignon de Montfort, St Catherine of Siena, and Pope St Pius V. During the past week, these feasts have come one after the other. Together these Dominican saints provide a rich commentary on the particular devotion to our blessed Lady that should flourish among all Christian believers. Louie de Montfort's *True Devotion* remains a classic piece of spiritual instruction on Our Lady. It has inspired the present Holy Father, who takes his often repeated exclamation, "Open Your Door to Christ" from the life of this 17<sup>th</sup>-century French missionary priest, who after the horrors of the Wars of Religion won many people back to the life of Godly devotion.

Pope St Pius V promotion of the rosary and of the title Mary, *Help of Christians* is also well known. As one of the chief architects of the Catholic reform of the 16<sup>th</sup>-century, Pius V restored the liturgical life of the Church, and encouraged the kind of reforms that introduced the Church into the Modern period. Both of these priest saints made devotion to Mary and devotion to the Eucharist central features of their preaching and teaching. It is safe to observe that no renewal can emerge in the Church unless it displays the authentic marks of Marian and Eucharistic piety.

Before we consider further this claim of two holy priests, one a home missionary and the other Pope, we should turn to the third member of the Dominican troika, the only Doctor of the Church among them, Catherine of Siena. Catherine's views about our Blessed Lady are perhaps less known than those of either or Grignon de Montfort or Pope Pius V. This evening, then, I would like to share with you some samples of Catherine's devotion to Mary. They come mostly from her correspondence. Catherine of Siena's *Letters* reveal the personal qualities and spiritual characteristics that distinguish this unique woman who belonged to the Third Order of St Dominic. She carried on

a correspondence with people of all sort, and was remarkable for the quality of her insight. What is most spectacular about Catherine's *Letters* is that she never learned to write. Jesus himself taught her to read and, miraculously, to write—with the help of scribes and assistants. No wonder that Catherine begins each letter by invoking her "sweet Jesus" and his "most sweet mother Mary."

Above all, Mary is the sweet mother of Catherine's beloved Jesus: "his sweet mother, Mary." She grasped the simple logic of the Incarnation: because God sent his Son into the world, and the Son came among us as one like us, he needed to be born of a mother. She presses this identity in a way that can even give us moment for pause. "The Eternal Son was wounded in his body and so," Catherine maintains, "his Mother, for that bodily flesh was from her." "Ave verum Corpus, natum de Maria Virgine." The Word took flesh of the Virgin Mary, born of the womb of the Virgin. This is the truth of the Catholic faith that allows us to invoke Mary as Mother of the Eucharist. Catherine goes on to describe the Incarnation in a way that emphasizes the indispensable role of the Virgin Mary in our salvation. "Like seed taking root in the field that is Mary: "O happy and sweet Mary: you have given us the flower of sweet Jesus." There is a 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russian icon that depicts Our Lady with the Eucharistic Christ within her: "Your Lap has become The Holy Table."<sup>1</sup>

Six centuries before, Catherine echoes the same sentiment. Catherine tells a correspondent: "Truly, truly, in this blessed and sweet field of Mary, the Word was inserted into his flesh. Like the grain of his Word in the field of Mary." We are always brought back to the original union of mother and child that is the foundation for every other union in the Church. "Consider, consider," Catherine addresses the Queen of Naples in a letter, "the ineffable love of God and the sweetness of the

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<sup>1</sup> For a copy, write to St Andrew Rublev Icons, P.O. Box 5352, Albuquerque, NM 87185.

delicious fruit of an immaculate heart . . . that was in Mary." This sweetness comes to us in her, and through the blessed Eucharist.

Catherine finds joy on Mary's days (273). She tells us that she prayed "with Mary and St Catherine [of Alexandria]" while awaiting the execution of a Sieneese political prisoner, and then openly cried out "Maria" as a sign that she dearly wanted his conversion (295). And she received it, for, with his last words, he replied "Jesus, Catherine."

Catherine's teaching on Our Lady insists that the mother of her sweet Jesus is also our most sweet mother. And Catherine makes this point again and again. In a letter addressed "To Lady Paula of Fiesole," Catherine says that Mary works only for the honor of God and the salvation of souls (144). To Dona Lapa, her natural mother: "Stay close to the most sweet mother Mary, for she knows the sufferings of discipleship. If you would have asked the apostles, 'why are you so happy with Mary?' They would have responded 'Because we have denied ourselves and are now dedicated of the honor of God and of the salvation of souls.'" Again, the apostles, says Catherine, stay close to Mary for the development of their faith (240).

Thus, Catherine urges all sorts of people to remain united with Mary. To a married woman of Lucca, she writes: "In great tribulations stay close to Mary, who loves without measure (164). To the Prior and the Brothers of the Company of the Virgin Mary (184): No one wants to be deprived of the affection of Mary. Practical advice to a Sieneese burger and his sons "Keep Saturdays for Mary!" (258).

To a recently widowed woman, whom she wished to comfort: "Take communion on feasts of Mary (262). To a prostitute, whom she wished to console: "Run to Mary for she is the mother of mercy and compassion (276). Catherine tells soldiers who are loyal to the Pope (347) that Mary

will strengthen and protect them in battle. And Catherine, of course, does not fail to tell the Pope himself, Urban VI, how happy she is that the most sweet Mother Mary and sweet St Peter (after all, he was the Pope!) will protect him.

But Catherine's Marian doctrine manifests itself most clearly when she writes to her counselor and guide, the Dominican friar Raymond of Capua. Indeed, Raymond is the son given to her by the Virgin Mary (211). Later after he becomes the Master of the Dominican Order, she declares that "As a father and son (Raymond) was given to her by the sweet Mother Mary." She counsels Raymond (100): "Do not put the end, the *finis*, of your life in anything other than to delight and to repose in the cross with Christ crucified. When you act like this, you will be a son of Mary and a spouse of the eternal word." Again, she insists in a Dominican way, "Remember the doctrine of Mary and of the sweet and first Truth" (104). "Maintain self-knowledge and the offering of humility and of continual prayer." When Raymond is troubled, she comforts him: "Have confidence that the Virgin Mary will fulfill my desire for you" (267). "In periods of spiritual turbulence," says Catherine, "keep to the little boat of divine mercy that Mary obtains in her embrace of the cross." She further counsels Raymond straightforwardly to tell the Pope that he should find his strength in Mary and before the holy cross "with most devout and humble prayer, with a candid knowledge of self, with an alive faith and the will to suffer" (272).

Today, Catherine tells the whole Church that devotion to Mary and union with Jesus, the Eternal Wisdom of the Father form the basis of their life and apostolate.

For the spiritual children of Catherine, her most clear and unequivocal teaching is that all Christians should invoke the most sweet and holy name of Mary in every circumstances, especially stressful ones, and with great love. Her own *Letters* witness to her practice of this golden rule of the

spiritual life, for Catherine never utters a word—any word—to anyone with out first saying, Sweet Jesus, Jesus Love, most Sweet Mother Mary!

Filial devotion to the Virgin Mother of God always ensures that we come before the Eucharist. In this blessed Sacrament of the Altar, under the appearances of bread and wine the Son of Mary, the Lord Jesus Christ, abides really, truly, and substantially present. It is the sacrament of the Lord's sweetness. What else draws us and keep us before the Lord? If we invoke Mary as Mother of the Eucharist (and the Holy Father has addressed this prayer to her, based on the piety of the Slovak people), we do so in order to emphasize the substantial unity between the Risen Lord and this sacrament of his presence. Born of Mary, Present in the Eucharist. Lord have mercy on us. Sweet Jesus, Jesus Love, most Sweet Mother Mary.