

THE PRIEST IN UNION WITH MARY

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With Special Reference to the Influence of Her Universal Mediation on the Spiritual Formation of Priests

THIS chapter falls into two parts: the first considers what is required for the spiritual formation of priests, and the second discusses how Our Blessed Lady is admirably suited to meet these needs, progressively shaping the priest's soul both by her prayer and by the mysterious influence of her universal mediation.

1 . The Priest's Intellectual and Spiritual Formation

It is easy to discover what is required for the spiritual and intellectual formation of a priest by studying the failings which ought to be avoided—even though we are constantly falling into them.

There are many novices and seminarians who neglect one or another aspect of their priestly training. Some of them do not put sufficient effort into their study, so that they may become priests fully instructed in Christian doctrine for the good of souls committed to their care later on. They excuse their negligence on the plea of devoting more time to spiritual exercises, and thus they become indolent and careless---faults which may easily last for the whole of their priestly life, while the souls committed to their care look to them for the help which only a priest can give.

Other novices and seminary students go to the other extreme. They concentrate so much on their studies that they neglect their interior life and spiritual duties under the pretext of necessary study. Gradually they may lose their spirit of piety completely, and possess nothing more than an "official piety," the exterior piety of a church functionary. Problems of philosophy, of theology, of history, of canon law—these are their constant preoccupation. Sometimes they become so entangled in the complex network of these problems that they lose that higher simplicity of mind which is essential for preserving a wise and correct critical faculty—all the more necessary as the problems become more complex.

In other words, their intellectual pursuits are no longer sufficiently inspired by the spirit of faith and of love for God and for souls. They are treated as purely natural activities rather than as means of holiness, and are motivated by an inordinate love of self, by egoism, or, perhaps, by a secret pride and ambition. These novices and seminarians are certainly not preparing themselves for a fruitful apostolate.

They are living a superficial life, more concerned with external appearances than with their inner self. They find themselves entangled in a maze of questions, possessing no unity of mind. Why? Because they lack that supernatural spirit which is essential if they are to order their study correctly toward God and the saving of souls.

In a word, their outlook is almost exclusively directed toward externals; it is too superficial, too complicated. Their mind lacks unity, depth and elevation—or, as the moderns would say, the third dimension is missing. Extent and breadth of knowledge they possess, but no depth. Hence they are mentally immature and without that keen perception of intellect which is required if a priest is to have the critical faculty expected of him.

In addition to these intellectual difficulties, there are those arising from the affections which are allowed to turn aside from their true object and become too human, too sensual, and therefore, dangerous. These can prove a serious obstacle to that spirit of chastity and purity of heart which is necessary for a truly spiritual and priestly life.

Therefore, what is required? A greater unity, depth and elevation of life, so that the priest may live under the continual impulse of the Theological Virtues and under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost by way of the Seven Gifts. "The Spirit breatheth where he will" [John 3: 8], and the small barque of our soul will be driven along the right course, provided that its sails are not secured by too many ropes—venial sins of sensuality, curiosity, indiscretion, hidden pride and ambition.

But how is the seminarian or novice or young priest to find this greater unity, depth and elevation of life which he requires in order to rise above the complex nature of his studies and above the dangers of sentimentality and sensuality?

In order to become a good priest, the seminarian or novice needs the help of a spiritual mother—holy, vigilant, brave, benevolent, loving, who will keep him on his course like the star of the sea—who, as the invisible mistress of his soul, secretly but nonetheless really and securely directs his intellect, will and sense faculties.

I myself had personal experience of this need as a young student. At that time I was so engrossed in the many and varied questions of critica and metaphysics that I was in danger of losing my simplicity and elevation of mind and balanced judgment. It was then I realized that I needed a spiritual mother with unlimited kindness and wisdom. This is easily understood when we remember how any child receives its early training.

While the seminarian or novice was young, there were many things which he learned from his earthly mother—his first prayers, for example. At that age he was ready to believe anything his mother told him, especially when she spoke to him of God, our Heavenly Father. He trusted her implicitly and loved her with the love of his whole heart. And so, in his younger days, he made spontaneous acts of faith, hope and charity toward God, Whom he had come to know through his mother, and these acts were made even before he had learned the formula set down for them in the catechism.

Each of us learned much from our mother even without the aid of words. When we saw her return from the altar rails in deep recollection and gratitude, we understood—some more than others—that this act of thanksgiving was something mysterious and sacred.

The time comes when the novice or seminarian has to leave his earthly mother, but it is then that he needs a spiritual mother to watch over his priestly formation, so that his life may bear almost spontaneous and continual witness in a practical form to the workings of the three theological virtues. These virtues, together with humility and perfect purity, must be constantly growing so that the future priest may live not for himself but for God and the saving of souls.

The study of philosophy, theology, history and canon law is insufficient; the concentration required could make the soul a stranger to itself, if it did not remain united to God. Furthermore, it would find itself almost irretrievably lost in the maze of such questions, and then what would we find in such a soul, if it lacked a genuine spiritual life? Certainly not God, but self-love, secret ambition and a craving for personal satisfaction.

To prevent this superficiality and entanglement of mind during our study, and to quicken our intellectual efforts with spiritual life, we require a loftier spirit—a spirit of humility, self-denial, purity, faith, confidence, love of God and souls.

But where are we to look for this spirit on which depend the unity and elevation of our life?

In actual fact, Christ our Savior has willed to communicate this spirit to us through the Blessed Virgin Mary, whom He has chosen to be the universal Mediatrix of all graces—of all kinds of graces, for she is the mother and Queen of Apostles, of Martyrs, of Confessors, of Virgins and of all Saints. This spiritual mother of all men obtains for us every grace we receive—even those particular graces for which we ask when we pray: “Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us now . . .”; this “now” means that we are asking for the individual grace of the present moment—for example, for study, for chastity, for the preservation of charity.

Our spiritual mother teaches us without the aid of words, and she gives us something far more valuable than mere learning in theology or philosophy; she gives us the spirit of sacred wisdom, which is first and foremost a powerful spirit of living faith in God—a discerning faith in virtue of the gift of understanding, a contemplative faith in virtue of the gift of wisdom.

The soul of the seminarian or novice is no longer a stranger to itself in its studies, for these are now inspired by a spirit of faith. They are no longer born of curiosity or ambition, nor are they treated as purely natural activities.

The student never again loses himself in the complex network of problems which call for his attention, since he now possesses a suitable approach to his study and a sufficiently supernatural elevation of mind. In this way Our Blessed Lady can become the priest’s guide not only for the preservation of chastity, humility and fraternal charity, but also for the study of sacred science. This is her method of training her sons preparing for the priesthood.

The Influence of Mary

Why is Our Blessed Lady capable of exerting her influence on the training of priests? Why is she so anxious to do so—and in what way does she put her desire into effect?

Our Blessed Lady has the power to exert this wonderful influence on our souls because she is the Mother of God, the Mother of the Savior, the Mother of the High Priest of the New Law, the universal Mediatrix of all graces. But, in

addition to this power which she possesses, she also has the desire to exercise it because she is supremely kind, benevolent and loving. Furthermore, she puts this desire into effect once we ask her to be our mother and to prepare us each day for the worthy reception of the priesthood and for the fruitful exercise of our office later on.

This is evident if we consider, first, the relation existing between the Divine motherhood and the priesthood; secondly, Our Lady as the spiritual mother of priests; and finally, Our Lady as the outstanding example of devotion to the Eucharist. 2

The Divine Motherhood and the Priesthood

In considering this subject, it is essential to adhere closely to the literal sense of the words involved, avoiding the exaggerated use of metaphor— frequent fault in this matter—because in such metaphors it is difficult to know what precisely is true. Our Lady has sometimes been referred to as the “Virgin priest,” without sufficient note being taken of the fact that she is not a priest in the strict sense of the word. She has not received the priestly character, and therefore, cannot consecrate the Eucharist. However, she is in a most eminent way a priest in the wide sense of the term—to a greater degree than any of the Saints who were not priests, such as St. Francis of Assisi, or St. Benedict Joseph Labre. As Fr. Olier points out so rightly, Our Lady possessed the spirit of the priesthood to a degree surpassing everyone else, but she was never a priest in the strict sense of the word. And thus we find that the Holy Office has forbidden the use of that title “Virgin priest,” because it could give rise to the Protestant confusion between the priesthood in the strict sense of the word and the priesthood in the wide sense. But it must be said at once that the superlative dignity of Our Lady’s Divine Motherhood far and away exceeds the priesthood of Christ’s ministers. This is a point which deserves our careful consideration. The pre-eminence of her dignity is derived from two sources. In the first place, Our Lady as the Mother of God has given us the principal Priest and Victim of the sacrifice of the Cross, since it is in His humanity that Christ is both priest and victim. Now, it is obviously a greater dignity to give the Incarnate Word His humanity than to make His body really present in the Eucharist, which is what His ministers do by their instrumental power. And secondly, Mary as the Co-redemptrix of the human race offered together with Christ the bloody sacrifice of the Cross. This is a greater honor than to offer the unbloody Sacrifice of the Mass, which is the means of applying to souls the merits of the Passion.

But we can go still further, and find the basis of Mary’s superior dignity in the fact that her Divine Motherhood surpasses not only the order of nature but also the order of grace. In virtue of the term of that relation of motherhood, it belongs to the hypostatic order established by the mystery of the Incarnation. Furthermore, as is stated in the Bull proclaiming the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, the decree of the Incarnation of the Word from the Virgin Mary includes at the same time both the predestination of Christ to natural Divine Sonship and the predestination of Mary to Divine Motherhood. From this follows her predestination to a degree of glory next to that enjoyed by Christ, and to her fullness of grace which fitted her to be the worthy Mother of God.

The Bull *Ineffabilis Deus* begins as follows: “From the beginning and before all ages, the God of indescribable perfection chose and prepared for His only-begotten Son the mother from whom He would receive His body and be born in the blessed fullness of time. His love for her so exceeded His love for all other creatures that in her alone did He take most friendly delight.” And, further on: “(God’s choice of her was made) in one and the same decree as the Incarnation of the Divine Wisdom.” In other words, this eternal decree did not relate to the Incarnation in any abstract form, but as it was to take place at a definite point in time and place. It referred to an individual event occurring in definite circumstances—to the Incarnation of the Son of God from the Virgin Mary, as we affirm in the Nicene Creed.

Therefore, by one and the same decree, Christ was predestined in His humanity to natural Divine Sonship and Mary to Divine Motherhood. But this decree preceded the one which determined the salvation of the human race through the merits of Christ. Hence Our Lady was first predestined to her Divine Motherhood as being the most important of all her honors, and then to her glory in Heaven. In the same way, Christ was first predestined to His natural Divine Sonship as the pre-eminent source of all His dignity, before being predestined to His glory. For, that to which one is first predestined is the end and purpose of all future decisions, and is of higher worth than anything else to which one may be predestined afterwards.

It is clear, therefore, that the Divine Motherhood is superior to the fullness of grace and glory which flowed from it

for the purpose of making Our Lady the worthy Mother of God. This superior dignity of the Divine Motherhood is due to the fact that it belongs to the hypostatic order by reason of its term, and thus surpasses the order of grace.

There are several important consequences resulting from these principles.

In the first place, although Mary could merit like ourselves everlasting life, she could not have merited the Divine Motherhood, which is so intimately connected with the Incarnation. This would be to merit the Incarnation itself, which has been the original source of all the merits of the human race since the time of the Fall—including those of Mary herself. Divine Motherhood, like the Incarnation, lies beyond the realm of merit, because the principle of merit cannot itself be merited.

Secondly, the Divine Motherhood is the explanation of all the graces conferred on Mary, and thus it is their measure and their purpose. Consequently it is something superior to all those graces. This is the common teaching of theologians.

Thirdly, because of her Divine Motherhood, Mary is entitled to receive from us not only the highest form of honor paid to any Saint, but also the special veneration which we call “hyperdulia.” **3**

It cannot be denied, therefore, that the Divine Motherhood surpasses in grandeur the priesthood of Christ’s ministers. Also, she, more than any other Saint, is a priest in the wide sense of the term; she shares in the mystical priesthood in the highest degree possible. The reason is abundantly clear. She has given us the principal Priest and Victim of the sacrifice of Calvary, and she cooperated with Christ in the offering of this sacrifice, so that she has merited for us by congruous merit all that Christ merited for us in strict justice. **4** She merited the actual release from sin and the restoration to Divine favor of the entire human race—redemption in its objective aspect—and not merely the applying of the merits of the Passion to individual souls—redemption in its subjective aspect. While she is not a priest in the strict sense of the word, she has received the fullness of the spirit of the priesthood, the spirit of Christ the Redeemer. This is well explained by Fr. Olier in his book, *La vie intime de la Sainte Vierge*.

Mary, the Spiritual Mother of Priests

When Christ was dying on the Cross, He turned to His Mother and said: “Woman, behold thy son” [John 19: 26]; and to John: “Behold thy mother.” [John 19: 27]

These words of the dying Savior, like the words used in the Sacraments, produced what they signified: in Mary’s soul they produced an increase of maternal love for John and for all who should be sanctified through the sacrifice of the Cross; in John’s soul they produced a profound filial love for the Mother of God.

Since Mary is the spiritual mother of all priests, she is interested especially in their sanctification and in their ministry. She offers special prayers for her priests, and obtains for them increasingly higher graces so that they may offer the Sacrifice of the Mass more worthily and labor for the salvation of souls more earnestly. But her choicest gift to priests is a better understanding of the sacrifice of Calvary, which is continued Sacramentally in the Mass. She also obtains for them the graces they need to appreciate better the value of Christ’s Blood, the supreme importance of the eternal happiness of souls, and the deep wretchedness of eternal damnation.

In this way, priests who remain faithful to Mary are fired by her with extraordinary zeal. This is particularly true of those priests who consecrate themselves to Mary in the way suggested by St. Louis Marie De Montfort in his book, *Treatise on True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin* [which is also called simply *True Devotion to Mary*]. This work has now been translated into almost every language and is regarded as a precious jewel among the many treasures of the Church.

By this act of consecration, priests hand over to Mary all those merits properly so called [de condigno] which cannot be applied to others, asking her to guard this spiritual treasure against the enemies of their soul. Should they have the misfortune to lose this treasure through mortal sin, they rely on her to obtain for them the grace of fervent contrition, so that the store of merit which they previously possessed may be restored in its entirety. St. Thomas says: “The intensity of a penitent’s sorrow for sin is sometimes proportionate to a greater degree of grace than that which he possessed before committing his sin; on other occasions, it corresponds to an equal or even to a smaller degree of grace. And therefore, the grace received after forgiveness is sometimes greater than it was before [this was probably true of Peter when he repented of his triple denial], sometimes equal, sometimes less. The same is true of the virtues

which flow from grace.” [IIIa, q. 89, a. 2]

Therefore those who consecrate themselves in this special way to the Blessed Virgin Mary entrust to her their merits de condigno, so that they may be well guarded, bear fruit, and be fully restored through fervent contrition if ever they should be lost by mortal sin.

Moreover, these votaries of Mary place in her hands whatever part of their good works may be given over to other souls—their merits of congruity, the satisfactory value of their acts, their prayers for others, the indulgences which they gain. Our Lady certainly distributes these gifts to others with greater wisdom and charity than we would. This does not mean that we need not pray for our relatives and friends; this is an obligation due in gratitude, which Our Lady would not allow us to forget. But among our relatives and friends there are some who stand in urgent need of help without our knowing who they are. Our Blessed Lady knows perfectly well who they are, and she takes care to give them as much help as possible from our good works. The conclusion to be drawn from what we have said is obvious: Mary, as the spiritual mother of priests, gives special help to those who consecrate themselves to her in the way described, both in their interior life and in their ministry.

How does Our Blessed Lady bring about the spiritual formation of those who follow out this suggested path of consecration to her? St. Louis Marie De Montfort gives the explanation: “Mary is like a mold in which Jesus forms His Saints.” She is the model of sanctity, the prototype which Christ follows in forming Saints.

St. Louis says that there are two forms of spiritual direction, just as there are two ways of making a statue. A statue can be made by hammering and chiseling a piece of wood or marble—a difficult and lengthy process, during which a single awkward blow may ruin the entire work. But there is another way, a much easier way—by putting clay into a mold. This is the method which Christ adopts for the spiritual formation of souls who have a great love for Our Blessed Lady, and who are urged by that love to a humble imitation of her virtues.

Mary, an Outstanding Example Of Devotion to the Eucharist

Christ entrusted His Mother to St. John the Evangelist—a model of contemplation—who celebrated the Eucharistic Sacrifice in virtue of his priestly power and gave Our Lady Holy Communion. **5** For Our Blessed Lady, the Eucharistic Sacrifice was a perfect memorial of the Sacrifice of the Cross, which remained vividly imprinted on her memory. In consequence, the Real Presence of the Sacred Victim and the unbloody immolation on the altar were for her of supreme value. She penetrated into the meaning of this Mystery even more deeply than did St. John, and also realized more perfectly that Christ is the principal Priest actually offering the Masses celebrated each day. Neither the faith of St. John nor our own faith will bear comparison with Mary’s active faith, enlightened by the gifts [of the Holy Ghost], in its grasp of the full meaning of these words: He is “always living to make intercession for us.” [Heb. 7: 25]

During Mary’s lifetime the liturgy of the Mass did not yet exist in the form in which we find it, for example, in the third or fourth century. There was the Eucharistic Sacrifice, the Breaking of Bread, and the Eucharistic Communion, which Our Lady herself must certainly have received—although this has been called into question. However, we cannot think of Our Blessed Lady as anything but an exemplary Christian. Moreover, she saw in the Eucharistic Sacrifice or “Breaking of Bread” the uniting together of worship offered in Heaven and of that offered on earth, since it is the same principal Priest present Sacramentally on the altar who is also in Heaven in His natural and glorified state. Our Blessed Lady knew quite well that the celebrant is only the minister of Christ, speaking and acting in His name.

Her faith, enlightened by the gifts, enabled her to see clearly the effect of Consecration—the Real Presence of Christ on the altar—and also the effects of the sacrifice on Souls in Purgatory and on earth. No other creature on earth has ever possessed such faith, perfected by the gifts of understanding and of wisdom. For that reason, she was able to appreciate far better than we can how the Mass extends its influence over the whole earth and into Purgatory and even into Heaven, insofar as it gives glory to God.

In the same way as on Calvary she had joined her own personal offering to that of her Son, so whenever she assisted at the Eucharistic Sacrifice she offered herself as the universal Mediatrix and Co-redemptrix on behalf of the Apostles and of the entire Church. This she did in view of her profound understanding of the four ends of the Sacrifice.

Apart from the homage paid by Christ Himself, God has never received from any of His creatures more humble adoration, more sincere and universal thanksgiving, more valuable and efficacious reparation and intercession for the saving of souls of every race and condition. This prayer of Mary was the mainstay of the Apostles as they journeyed through the world preaching the Gospel and at the supreme moment of their Martyrdom. Mary has always been and still is the Queen and Mother of every Apostle.

But, while thinking of Mary's participation in the Eucharistic Sacrifice, we must not lose sight of her devotion in receiving Holy Communion. **6**

The more we hunger for Holy Communion, the greater our fervor in receiving it and the profit we draw from it. But we cannot experience this spiritual hunger unless we believe in the value of the Eucharist and its fruits, unless we hope and love. Now Mary possessed these three theological virtues in the highest degree. [See my former book, *The Mother of the Savior*, pp. 123-125, 130-134.]

Mary's firm and ardent desire to receive her Son in Holy Communion was not checked in any way by the consequences of Original Sin, or by any actual sin—even the least grave—or by any voluntary imperfection. For His part, Jesus desired most eagerly to consummate the holiness of His dearly beloved Mother.

Therefore each of Mary's Communion was spiritually more fervent and more fruitful than the preceding one. The nearer she approached to God, the more rapid was her progress toward Him—just as a body increases its rate of fall the nearer it approaches the earth, although this is but a weak symbol of Mary's spiritual progress.

Holy Communion brought to her each day a great increase in charity and in the infused virtues and the gifts, and prepared her for an even better Communion on the following day. And thus she never faltered in her increasingly rapid progress toward God. This is the law of grace which all of us should follow, but it remains partly unfulfilled in us because of our attachment to venial sin. For this reason our Holy Communion may be spiritually less fervent one day than on the preceding day. But in Mary there was no venial sin to check this law of spiritual acceleration.

In this, Mary was the model of Eucharistic devotion—the glorious vessel of devotion.

The effects of her Holy Communion were remarkable. Christ present in the Eucharist shed on her pure soul His supernatural light and love, thus giving her greater understanding of this Sacrament and a greater desire for it. She was, as it were, a spotless mirror reflecting back on Christ the light and love she received from Him and directing toward us the graces of faith, hope and love.

In Mary, the priest is provided with a perfect model of Eucharistic devotion. She teaches him to celebrate his Mass in a spirit of sacrifice, in a spirit of reparative worship. If he fails to possess this spirit of sacrifice, he will prove a hindrance to the flow of grace from Calvary to individual souls. He should think of what would have happened to us if Christ had refused to accept the humiliations of the Passion, or if Our Blessed Lady had refused to join her own personal offering to that of Christ.

The priest, therefore, in union with Christ and Mary, should pray most earnestly for the chief intentions of the Church and for the salvation of souls who have to live in the world surrounded by pernicious errors. He must also ask Our Lady to obtain for him a hunger and thirst for the Eucharist, so that his Holy Communion may become each day at least spiritually more fervent. It is in this way that he will arrive at that zeal for the glory of God and for the saving of souls without which he cannot attain to priestly perfection, or to that spirit of Christ, which is indispensable for a fruitful apostolate.

End Notes

1. Cf. Fr. Paul Philippe, O.P., *La Très Sainte Vierge et le Sacerdoce*, Paris, 1946.
2. Cf. the excellent work written by Fr. P. Philippe, O.P., *La Très Sainte Vierge et le Sacerdoce*.
3. It follows, therefore, that if the Mother of God were to receive the priestly character she would be receiving something of less value than her original dignity, since it is a greater honor to give the Word His humanity and to offer with Him the sacrificial shedding of Blood on Calvary than to give Him His Real Presence in the Eucharist and to offer with Him the unbloody Sacrifice of the Mass. Similarly, as St. Thomas rightly says, a bishop, while able to be of

service in the saving of souls, would be adopting a less perfect vocation in entering the religious state, because the religious state is one in which a man is tending toward perfection, whereas a bishop should be actually exercising perfection. *Summa, IIa IIae*, q. 185, a. 4, ad 1.

4. This—the common teaching of theologians—was sanctioned by [Pope St.] Pius X in his encyclical *Ad diem*, February 2, 1904; cf. *Denz.* 1978a. [Cf. footnote, p. 77.]

5. Fr. Olier draws attention to this point in his book: *Vie interieure de Marie*, p. 250, and in his *Panegyrique de S. Jean*.

6. This is discussed by Fr. Justin of Miechow, O.P. in his work: *Discursus circa litanias lauretanas B. Mariae Virginis; vas insigne devotionis*.