

BLESSED LOUIS MARIE GRIGNION DE MONTFORT

MARK HEATH, O.P.

II: The Man and the Book of the True Devotion



HERE was one thing in which Blessed de Montfort was not like St. Dominic: his size. Dominic, according to X-ray pictures of his coffin was five feet five inches in height; Louis was more nearly six feet six. St. Dominic was thin and wiry; de Montfort was large, brawny and strong. He had inherited from his father a very strong and robust body. Often when he directed the building of churches, he was known to move timber and stones which were too heavy for the peasants with whom he worked and to whom he preached.

On one occasion while preaching in a town square he was interrupted and annoyed by a crowd of drinkers. They were seated at a table near the place where he was preaching and were singing and shouting. They were so loud and boisterous that the audience could not follow the sermon. De Montfort noticed this, and walking over to the men, seized the tables one by one, and turned them over. The crocks and bottles went scattering to the ground; the drinkers, to the nearest cover as fast as their legs would take them. Blessed Louis returned and placidly continued his sermon.

Yet despite his great strength and fine physique, the effect of grace on his character was to make him gentle and mild. "I should have been the terror of France were it not for grace" he once said of himself. His biographers uniformly remark that he was a terror, but to the devil and the heretics.

Louis Grignon was born in Montfort, a small village in Brittany in France, January 31, 1673. Here he was baptized and confirmed; he chose as his Confirmation name Mary and his childhood was marked by devotion to her. He studied in his father's house until he was old enough to attend the Jesuit college at Rennes. He finished his classical studies there with distinction and was noted as a virtuous as well as a studious boy. His devotion to Mary again was noteworthy.

He moved next to Paris for studies at the Sorbonne. Before he reached Paris he chose to leave his family name behind because, as

he said, he was more a child of grace than of flesh and blood, and named himself simply Louis Marie of Montfort; that was the place in which he received grace in Baptism. He was not to reassume Grignon until thirteen years later.

He studied pre-theological courses at the Sorbonne for two years. He applied for admission then to the seminary of St. Sulpice. He was accepted with such joy that on the day of his arrival the community sang a solemn *Te Deum* thanking God for having sent a man, renowned already for his holiness. He studied there for five years, during that time acting as the sacristan of the Lady Chapel, a position in which he was marked for his devotion to his work. He was ordained to the priesthood on the fifth of June, 1700.

He began his preaching immediately and chose as his work from the beginning the return to the Mother of God. In 1703, in Poitiers, where his parish was made up of four thousand sick poor, he founded his first religious group, the Daughters of Wisdom, to assist him in his work as chaplain in a large hospital. He continued his preaching although he met much opposition in the form of Jansenist persecution. Finally, broken by the opposition, he travelled, in 1706, to Rome to offer an account of his services to the Holy Father, Pope Clement XI.

His intention in this visit was to offer himself to the Pope as a missionary to the American Indians. Clement, however, saw in this young priest the future Marian preacher, and, instead, commissioned him Apostolic Preacher to the West of France. He encouraged him in the work he was doing and discussed the foundation of a group of missionaries who were to work with him, the Missionary Servants of the Company of Mary, known today as the De Montfort Fathers. They were approved finally as a community in 1713.

He returned to Poitiers and began his apostolic life anew. He lived ten years in which he was tireless in preaching to this country weakened by the ravages of Calvinism and controlled by the Jansenists who were opposed to him, and to his word. He preached in so many places that there is today no way of reckoning them, and established everywhere the Rosary and the True Devotion. Finally, while preaching a mission in St. Lawrence on the Sevre, on the 28th of April, 1716, only forty-one years old, and living only sixteen years in the priesthood, he died. It has been a persistent tradition that he was poisoned by a Jansenist enemy. He was beatified in 1888. His feast day is celebrated on the date of his death. According to recent reports from Rome he will be canonized after the present war.

It was while he was at St. Sulpice that he learned from the

saintly M. Olier, who was to found the Sulpician Fathers, of the devotion to the Blessed Virgin which was from that time on to be known under de Montfort's name.¹ He himself writes that M. Olier was taught the devotion by Mother Agnes of Jesus, a Dominican nun of the convent of Langeac. She in turn had been taught it by a voice from heaven one time while in great spiritual anguish. Later in her life the Blessed Mother and St. Cecilia appeared to her and placed around her neck a chain of gold as a testimony of their joy at Mother Agnes' practising this devotion.

Yet Providence entered in a remarkable way because it was many years before the world would know that de Montfort had preached this doctrine. He himself, while writing of his life, remarked that one of the most characteristic elements of it was the hostility and opposition which he received. He and his teaching were attacked so much that many who received the doctrine lost it. Even his memory was clouded and darkened by the stories that were circulated about him. It is a fact of history that the work to which he dedicated his life was unknown except to a few. Historians writing his life shortly after his death, while extolling his life and his virtue, his suffering, and even his own personal devotion to the Blessed Virgin, nevertheless, failed to mention that he preached any special devotion to her.

This condition continued for many years. He was hailed as the preacher of the Cross and the Rosary, but not the True Devotion. Even the official decisions of theologians in Rome commissioned by the Pope to investigate his preaching and to report on his doctrine, made no mention of his teaching on the Blessed Virgin.

One of the contributing causes of this silence was the mysterious and complete disappearance of his book *The Treatise on the True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*. De Montfort himself predicted that "raging brutes will come in fury to tear with their diabolical teeth this little writing and him whom the Holy Ghost has made use of to write it; or at least to envelope it in the silence of a coffer, in order that it may not appear." More than that, he predicted that in those latter times which were to open the age of Mary the book would be discovered; that then those who preached it would be persecuted. His sons in the Company of Mary continued to preach the true devotion immediately after his death and were abused and reviled for it.

Yet, despite their work, the book which was the complete and almost official statement of the ideals and the theology of the devotion

¹ cf. *Dominicana*, Vol. XXIX, No. 1, p. 26.

was lost and remained hidden and unknown to anyone in a chest of old books. It was not until over one hundred twenty-five years later, in 1842, that the book was discovered by accident at St. Lawrence on the Sevre, the place of Blessed de Montfort's last mission and death.

The book was identified as being in the founder's hand-writing, was joyfully hailed, and immediately published. Since that time it has appeared in one hundred twenty editions, in all European languages, and in five editions in the United States.

The first American edition was offered to the public by a Dominican, Fr. Charles Hyacinth McKenna, O.P., himself a great preacher of the Rosary, who published a revised edition of the True Devotion in 1887. In his preface Fr. McKenna wrote: "In preparing for the press these pages, containing the substance of De Montfort's teachings on the Blessed Virgin, the compiler desires to popularize what he, with others, considers in very deed the true devotion to our Immaculate Mother. He feels that society demands the spread of this devotion; that the spirit of the Church, and the encyclicals of the Holy Father, call for a greater love of Mary."²

The book itself treats of the whole field of devotion to the Blessed Virgin. Its relation to the Divine plan for the sanctification of souls is brought out, with the relation between devotion to Mary and the life of grace in each soul. It is divided in general according to the following outline:

- I. Of devotion to the Blessed Virgin in general.
 - A. Necessity of Mary in divine plan of sanctification.
 - B. Fundamental truths of devotion to the Blessed Virgin.
 1. Jesus is the last end of this devotion.
 2. We need Mary as Mediatrix with our Mediator, Christ.
 - C. Choice of the true devotion.
 1. False devotion and devotees.
 2. The True Devotion.
- II. Of perfect devotion to the Blessed Virgin.
 - A. Nature of perfect devotion: perfect consecration to Mary.
 - B. Six motives of the perfect devotion.
 - C. Eight effects of this devotion.
 - D. Practises of this devotion.

This book is for all, great and small alike. In 1917 the book

² *The Secret of Sanctity Revealed in Mary* by a Dominican Father. Philadelphia, H. L. Kilner and Co. 1887, p. vi.

was the foundation of the spiritual life of a group of zealous apostles in Dublin. Realizing their obligation to preach the faith and this devotion, they formed a society which is known as the Legion of Mary, today a world wide organization. One of the heavenly patrons of the Legion is Blessed Louis de Montfort. In the handbook of the Legion, the book of the True Devotion is called the "Tutor of the Legion."

Every Pontiff who has known the True Devotion has approved and encouraged it. Pope Leo XIII erected a confraternity to foster the devotion, and beatified Blessed Louis. Pope Pius X used the doctrine in it in the composition of his Encyclical letter for the Jubilee of the Immaculate Conception. Pope Pius XI confided that he had practised this devotion since his youth; that he even knew the treatise by heart.

The Irish worker, Matt Talbot, whose life of prayer and penance while a laborer in Dublin brought him the veneration of all the people, was first brought to see the beauty and necessity of holiness by reading this book. He is only one among many who have been made holier by the book. But this would not have surprised de Montfort; a reading of the book will show that he expected it.

The doctrine in this little dogmatic book has been used and quoted by Dominican, and other theologians, in their most profound writing on the virtues, the spiritual life, and the Blessed Mother.³

It has been read and used by others not so learned, who have risen high in the love of God by it. Dominican preachers in their teaching on the Mother of God have used the doctrine in it. It has had disciples in all times and in all parts of the world. One of the greatest Americans in his generation was the Dominican Fr. Charles H. McKenna who published it first in the United States. Succeeding generations have not been without their devotees.

The Catholic Church in America and indeed throughout the whole world, mourns now one of its greatest and most saintly prelates, William Cardinal O'Connell, who wrote recently of the True Devotion: "I have known this form of devotion for many years and I have never hesitated to recommend it to those in whom the grace of God seemed to be at work, drawing them to a deeper and more intense spiritual life. As Rector of the American College in Rome, I proposed and taught it to the seminarians as an excellent means of

³ cf. Garrigou Lagrange, *Christian Perfection and Contemplation*, 1937, p. 386; *Les Trois Ages de la Vie Interieure*, II p. 354 to 363. Tanqueray, *The Spiritual Life*, 1930, p. 89. Cf. also De Koninck, *Thomist*, Vol. VI, No. 1, p. 11 and Carlson, *Thomist*, Vol. VII, No. 2, p. 162.

acquiring the holiness of their priestly ideal. It was with my encouragement that there was formed among them a *Blessed de Montfort Society*.⁴

Prelate and worker, preacher and teacher, layman, religious, priest, all know this book, the fruit of the study and meditation of a strong and brawny, yet humble and gentle, Dominican Blessed, Louis Marie Grignon de Montfort. Will the devotion, as the Cardinal wrote, continue to grow as "the mustard seed in the Gospel,"⁵ without great exterior display, by the grace of the Holy Ghost, and spread throughout the whole Church? If history is a sign, it will.

⁴ *Treatise on the True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary* by Blessed Louis Marie de Montfort. Fathers of the Company of Mary, Bay Shore, New York. 1941. p. xi.

⁵ *ibid.* p. x.