

## MATER BENEVOLENTISSIMA

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*“We also promise in filial devotion to obey the Virgin Mary, Mother of God, the immensely caring mother of our Order . . .”*

These words in the Constitutions of the Dominican Order beautifully sum up each friar’s relationship with the Blessed Virgin Mary. She is the “*Mater benevolentissima*,” the most loving Mother, of the Order. But is this just a pious platitude? Could not the callous critic object that this is true for every religious order? On what, then, do Dominicans stake their particular claim to Mary’s maternal benevolence?

That the Blessed Mother has exercised special care for the friars preachers is clear from the early history of the Dominican Order. In the *Vitae Fratrum* (trans. Joseph Kenny, O.P.), a compilation of stories from the earliest history of the Order, this becomes strikingly clear. We learn there that the Order came into being through the Blessed Mother’s intercession, and that it was through her guidance that the Order developed from its infancy. These stories of her interactions with the earliest friars were collected to inspire subsequent generations of Dominicans to imitate their elders in fostering a deep and pious relationship with that most loving mother who guided the Order in its earliest days.

Thus, it seems reasonable to expect that the basis for the unique Dominican claim that Mary is the *mater benevolentissima* of the Order will be found in the *Vitae Fratrum*. The purpose of this essay is to prove this claim. To do so, we will first establish some of the chief characteristics of loving motherhood in general and then

see how the *Vitae Fratrum* applies them to the Blessed Virgin's relationship with the Dominican Order.

### LOVING MOTHERHOOD IN GENERAL

To understand what sets the loving mother apart from other sorts of mothers, it is important to first consider motherhood in general and then to examine what a loving mother looks like. When we inquire into the nature of motherhood, two things immediately come to mind—the first is bearing children, the second is raising them. Motherhood begins with children. Without children, a woman can certainly be a wife. But isn't it children that provide the difference in a woman's life that makes her a mother?

Yet motherhood is not completed and perfected just by having children. It also involves raising them. The fact that a woman has borne children may mean *that* she is a mother, but how she raises them proves her to be a *good and loving* mother. Thus, a woman who adopts a child and raises him is, in some sense, even more a mother than the one who gave the child birth.

So what does loving motherhood look like? From the perspective of bearing children, loving motherhood is more than simply being open to the gift of life. From the perspective of raising children, it means neither doting on them nor spoiling them. In both of these regards, loving motherhood involves, among other things, intentionality and sacrifice.

To understand why intentionality is so important, it is helpful to consider the distinction between a "good habit" and a virtue. A good habit (or a bad one) is a rote activity that a person does without necessarily thinking; but a virtue pertains to an action that flows easily and is actually intended. In other words, virtuous actions aren't simply mindless activities. Unlike the automatic actions of machines and the instinctual actions of animals, virtuous actions involve everything that makes someone fully human. The mind and the heart are brought into the action in such a way that the

person is firm in his or her ability to freely and intentionally choose that which is good. The virtuously loving mother, then, is not only the mother who naturally does things to raise her children in a safe and healthy environment and with all the proper nurturing, but she is also the mother who intends to give birth, to feed and shelter her children, to educate them, and to set an example for them. Ultimately, she is the mother who raises them on the path to virtuous living.

This leads us to the other part of what makes a loving mother different—sacrifice. The loving mother raises her children in a way that teaches them the importance of love and sacrifice. By first showing love and sacrifice through her own actions, the loving mother raises her children to take up the same virtues in their own lives. Even though this might mean going through the pain of having to correct her children, the loving mother leads them on the path to salvation and consoles them when they fall short. This is true even to the point of sacrificing her own wants, desires, and comforts so that she can place her children first.

This reflection raises relevant questions: how does the *Vitae Fratrum* depict Mary as giving birth to the Order? What does it say about her role in raising it to a spiritual maturity? In order to respond, we turn now to the *Vitae Fratrum* itself.

#### THE LOVING MOTHER OF THE DOMINICAN ORDER

The *Vitae Fratrum* articulates Mary's role in the birth of the Dominican Order as a result of her desire for preachers to go into the world and carry out the task of converting sinners. At the time of the Order's foundation, heresy ran rampant through southern France and northern Italy. Visions were frequently recounted in which the Blessed Mother would plead with her Divine Son to be merciful to these sinners and send them preachers. It would have been just for Him to condemn them: he had sent patriarchs and prophets, he had come himself, and he had even left his apostles in

his stead. Nevertheless, the faithful strayed from the true faith and so deserved their just punishment. One such vision was recounted to Bl. Humbert of Romans by a Cistercian monk:

For three continuous days I saw Blessed Mary on her knees before her Son, praying for the people. Her Son reminded her of the benefits he had given the world and how the world repaid him evil for good, and said: "How can I spare the world any more when it is so ungrateful?" But the Virgin replied: "Good Son, do not act according to its wickedness but according to your mercy." At last Christ was overcome by her prayers and said, "At your wish I will still show mercy; I will send them preachers who will warn them; if they change their ways, fine; otherwise I will not spare them."

The *Vitae Fratrum* then goes on to recount, "This is what the venerable old man told us, and in a short while you preachers emerged. So you can hold without doubt that your Order was created through the prayers of the glorious Virgin." Thus, the Order was created for the conversion and salvation of souls, and it came about through Mary's intercession. She loved souls enough to beg her Son to stay His hand and, instead, to send preachers who would lead the straying sheep back to the fold. In other words, it was through Mary's love that the Order was conceived and brought into the world.

Aside from giving birth, a loving mother also raises her children in the ways of truth and leads them down the path of virtue and union with Christ. In addition to feeding, sheltering, and educating her children, a loving mother is also a model for living the virtuous life, offering her children an example to follow. In connection with this, the loving mother will also correct her children when they go wrong, and console them in their sorrows.

The Blessed Mother proves herself to be the most loving mother of the Order in each of these ways. To begin with, one story recounts how she actually provided the friars with food for their tables. There was a Cistercian monk visiting the brothers in Pisa, and they noticed that he was eating very little. After the meal, one of them inquired as to the reason why:

“Why did you eat so little or almost nothing, when the brothers had a good feast today?” He answered, “Brother, believe me, I have never eaten better in my whole life.” But the brother could not understand why he said this and asked with wonder, “How is that? I saw that you ate very little.” The monk then explained his statement: “I have never eaten better than today because I have never had such a waiter as you have. For I saw very clearly the Blessed Virgin Mary our Lady waiting on the brothers and putting out all the dishes for the brothers. I was so well refreshed by this that for joy of spirit I could eat little or nothing.”

The Blessed Mother also provided shelter for the brethren in Limoges. They had planned to move their priory because its current location was completely unsuitable, but they could not find enough financial support to complete the payment for the new location. The brethren prayed to the Blessed Mother and asked for her support, and on the next day she provided. The chaplain of the church of Dille came to the brethren saying, “Dearest brothers, you bought a new site, but you have no patron nor found anyone to pay the debt. So Blessed Mary, whom you praise night and day, will be your patron, and I, her servant, will pay for the place on her behalf.” In these two instances of feeding and sheltering, the Blessed Mother provided for the material sustenance of the brethren just as any loving mother would do.

Even with the importance of these acts, we find the true example of a loving mother is one who raises her children in the faith.



ALICE MARY HAVERS - MARY KEPT ALL THESE THINGS  
AND PONDERED THEM IN HER HEART

This involves educating her children, and the Blessed Mother in no way fell short of her task:

Once a brother had prepared his sermon in the usual way,  
but at the last minute changed the subject and preached



about something else which he had not thought of, and he did much better. [A] monk was present and saw, as he later told, the Blessed Virgin standing in front of him with an open book, dictating to him each word. Those who heard him and the brother himself were convinced that he preached a better, more fervent and helpful sermon than he had done for a long time.

Here, the education was not simply for the brother alone but also for the edification of those present. By being instructed on what to preach, he was likewise fulfilling his vocation of receiving the fruits of contemplation and sharing them, all for the purpose of the salvation of souls, and thus the Blessed Mother educated him in two respects.

A loving mother not only teaches her children what the faith is, but also how to live it out. This includes setting a good example and showing them what it means to live virtuously. Again, the Blessed Mother did not fall short with regard to educating her children in the Order. There was a brother who

greatly venerated the Blessed Virgin, honoring especially her heart which believed in Christ and loved him, her womb which bore him, her breasts which gave him milk, her rounded hands which served him, and her bosom where he lay; these are the repositories of all virtues. Frequently he would make prostrations in honor of each of them, saying each time the Hail Mary while considering the virtues by which she merited to become the Mother of God, and asking her to obtain the same for himself; these are, respectively, faith, humility, charity, chastity, kindness and patience. The Blessed Virgin appeared to him one Saturday and offered him the virtues he was venerating and praying for, letting him sensibly perceive this.

Here, the Blessed Mother is presented both as an exemplar of the virtues (for every last part of her was completely dedicated to the virtuous upbringing of Christ) and as an instructor in the virtuous life. The brother obtained these virtues through her intercession, and so she can be seen as educating the friar in the virtuous life.

Raising children in the faith also entails correcting them when they've strayed. Here, too, the Blessed Mother showed herself to be a loving mother. Just as any mother will correct her children for small faults in order that they might not commit more grievous ones, so too the Blessed Mother ensured that her sons were faithful to the ways of the Order. One seemingly insignificant example was that of the Blessed Mother's disappointment with a brother who loosened his belt and took off his shoes and stockings at night. This was contrary to the early Constitutions of the Order because the friars were always to be ready to preach. In fact, this was so important to the friars that the story is referred to on three different occasions throughout the *Vitae Fratrum*:

A brother was awake in his cell and saw the Blessed Virgin accompanied by some saints. After the brothers had gone to bed, she went through the dormitory blessing the brothers. One evening, while she was walking through, blessing as usual, he saw her pass by the cell of one brother, putting the hem of her cloak over her face. He noted which cell it was and the next day called the brother and asked him how he was, warning him to keep from every offense and negligence, and told him what he had seen. He found in him nothing blameworthy . . . except that because of the intense heat he had taken off his stockings and loosened his belt so that he could uncover his shoulders. This brother had been too pampered in the world. When he stopped this practice, the other brother saw him with the rest of the brothers receiving a blessing from the Blessed Virgin.



In another version of this story, a friar asked the Blessed Mother why she skipped over the brother—to which she responded, “he was not ready. Tell him to get ready.” The Blessed Mother’s action is not one of anger or disdain. Rather, she exemplifies the loving mother who corrects wrongs and exhorts to virtue. In this instance, she meant to give a correction so that the faulty practice would be stopped, and virtuous action would take its place: she wanted her sons perpetually prepared to fulfill their vocations.

Finally, the mother who raises her children lovingly consoles them in their times of sorrow. There are many instances of this in the *Vitae Fratrum*, but a particularly interesting illustration of this occurs in a story concerning a brother who was struggling with the temptation to leave the Order. The other brothers weren’t able to console him, and so he remained firm in his resolve to leave. Yet, the Blessed Mother came to console him and strengthen him in his vocation:

One morning, while he was sleeping before the altar of the Blessed Virgin after long prayer, our Lady appeared, holding two cups and saying, “You have wept and are thirsty, so drink now.” After he drank, she said, “What did you drink?” “Wine that is cloudy, bad tasting and mixed with dregs.” She then offered him the other cup and said, “Drink from this one.” When he did so, she said, “What did you drink?” “Very good wine, clear, very sweet and well filtered.” Then Blessed Mary told him, “Just as these two drinks are different from one another, so there is a greater distance between the good life you led in the world and that which you accepted in this Order. Do not be afraid or discouraged, because I will give you help.” The vision disappeared, and the brother was strengthened in the Order; thereafter he became a good lecturer and devout preacher.

While this remedy is not your average solution in times of temptation, it shows how profound the Blessed Mother's consolation can be. Not only did the brother receive a sensible foretaste of the goodness of his vocation, but he also later became "a good lecturer and devout preacher."

So does it seem fair to refer to the Blessed Mother as the most loving mother of the Order? Having perused some of the stories in the *Vitae Fratrum*, we can see that the Blessed Mother brought the Order into existence. She raised the friars by providing for them and instructing them. She sacrificed her own comforts, so to speak, by correcting and consoling them.

In other words, for the early friars, the Blessed Virgin Mary perfectly fulfilled the role of loving mother. Thus, they passed on these stories—and many more—to future generations of Dominicans in a spirit of filial piety, hoping that they too might have a relationship with the Blessed Mother. It's no surprise then that the Order now refers to Mary as the *mater benevolentissima*, the most loving Mother of the Order.

*Peter Martyr Yungwirth entered the Order of Preachers in 2007.*