

## **Marian Spirituality—A Personal Checklist**

by Paul F. Ford

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I often learn more from my students than I teach them. One such student, a Vietnamese priest, is finishing his master's thesis on the Marian devotions of his people in exile. His research has reviewed popular Marian literature of the post-WWII, pre-Vatican II era. I was struck by the lists he has discovered which various writers offered to their readers which would serve as a self-examination about the quality of one's devotion to our Lady. I then realized that similar lists are present in recent magisterial documents which might be helpful to turn into a personal inventories concerning our Marian spirituality.

### **The Signs of a Healthy Marian Devotion**

The introductions to the new Sacramentary and Lectionary of the Collection of Masses of the Blessed Virgin Mary are a compendium of the Church's understanding about the place of Mary in the Church's life. To read them in their entirety and to use the new Masses is to be refreshed in the teaching of Vatican II and of Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II. Among the most significant are the following two selections:

The powerful example of Mary that shines out in the celebration of the liturgy impels the faithful to become like the Mother, in order that they might

be fashioned more completely in the likeness of her Son. Her example also prompts the faithful to celebrate the mysteries of Christ with that same spirit of reverent devotion with which she took part in the birth of her Son, in his epiphanies, and in his death and resurrection. In particular, Mary's example urges the faithful: to treasure the word of God in their hearts and dwell on it assiduously; to praise God exultantly and thank him joyously; to serve God and neighbor faithfully and offer themselves generously; to pray with perseverance and make their petitions with confidence; to act in all things with mercy and humility; to cherish the law of God and embrace it with love; to love God in everything and above everything else; to be ready to meet Christ when he comes. (Marian Sacramentary, General Introduction, §17)

To the faithful who visit shrines dedicated to the Mother of God or who take part in the memorial of the Blessed Virgin on Saturday pastors should teach the most excellent homage of devotion they can offer the Blessed Virgin: that in liturgical celebrations they proclaim the word of God rightly and revere it with a special love; that they listen to this word with faith and keep it in their hearts; that they dwell on it inwardly and have it on their lips to share it with others; that they carry it out faithfully and let it shape their entire lives. (Marian Lectionary, Introduction, §10)

Applying the first description of Marian spirituality to my everyday life:

- Do I treasure the word of God in my heart and dwell on it assiduously?
- Do I try to praise God exultantly and thank him joyously?
- Do I try to serve God and neighbor faithfully and offer myself generously?

- Do I try to pray with perseverance and make my petitions with confidence?
- Do I try to act in all things with mercy and humility?
- Do I try to cherish the law of God and embrace it with love?
- Do I try to love God in everything and above everything else?
- Am I trying to be ready to meet Christ when he comes?

At Mass and other Sacraments, at Benediction and at Bible Services and other rites of the Church (the second quotation):

- Do I try to proclaim the word of God rightly and revere it with a special love?
- Do I try to listen to this word with faith and keep it in my heart?
- Do I try to dwell on it inwardly and have it on my lips to share it with others?
- Do I try to carry it out faithfully and let it shape my entire lives?

(For priests:  Am I trying to teach my people that this is the “most excellent homage of devotion they can offer the Blessed Virgin”?)

Looking at these items from time to time can help us to see how healthy our Marian spirituality is. The second checklist concerns how healthy our devotional life is.

### **Norms for Marian Devotions**

The following norms for Marian devotions are drawn from the apostolic exhortation of Pope Paul VI, Marialis Cultus (Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary). Numbers in parenthesis refer to paragraphs in Marialis Cultus.

A) Every form of worship should have a biblical imprint. Texts for prayer and chant

should draw their inspiration and wording from the Bible and should be imbued with the great themes of the Christian message (30).

Am I using devotional materials whose inspiration and wording are drawn from the Bible and imbued with the great Christian themes?

B) Devotions (especially those held in common) should be in harmony with the divine liturgy, derive their inspiration from it, and should orient people toward it . Further, they should take into account the seasons of the liturgical year (31).

Am I using devotional materials which are inspired by and in harmony with the liturgy and its seasons?

Am I using devotional materials which orient me to the liturgy?

C) There are twelve attitudes and practices to be avoided (38):

1)  Do I have a scornful attitude toward correct devotions which leaves them aside and doesn't fill the vacuum they leave?

2)  Am I doing any hybridizing which mixes liturgy and devotions without wholesome liturgical pastoral criteria?

3)  Is there in any of my devotions any exaggeration of content or form which falsifies doctrine?

4)  Is there in any of my devotions or in my lack of devotion any smallmindedness which obscures the figure and mission of Mary?

5)  Is there in any of my devotions any vain credulity which substitutes reliance on mere external practices for serious commitment?

6)  Is there in any of my devotions any sentimentality which is sterile and ephemeral?

- 7)  Is there in any of my devotions any exaggerated search for novelties and extraordinary phenomena? (The study of the sources of Revelation and attention to the doctrine of the Magisterium must prevail.)
- 8)  Is there in any of my devotions anything obviously legendary or false? (A devotion must be objective in its historical setting.)
- 9)  Is there in any of my devotions any onesidedness and overstressing single elements which compromise the overall picture given in the Gospel? (A devotion must match its doctrinal content.)
- 10)  Is there any unworthy self-interest about any of my devotions? (A devotion must be clear in its motivation).

An eleventh item is addressed to priests and people alike:

Priests and faithful should keep in mind that genuine Marian devotion does not demand the multiplication of Masses of the Blessed Virgin Mary, but that in their celebration everything—readings, songs, homily, general intercessions, the offering of the sacrifice—be done with propriety, care and a vital liturgical spirit (Marian Sacramentary, General Introduction, §37).

In the same section there is a twelfth expectation of priests:

The first concern of a priest celebrating with a congregation is the spiritual benefit of the faithful and he will be careful not to impose his personal preference on them. Above all he will make sure not to omit too often or needlessly the readings assigned for each day in the weekday Lectionary; the

Church's desire is to provide the faithful with a richer share at the table of the Lord's word.

D) Devotions should have "an ecumenical aspect," at least in "avoid[ing] any exaggeration which would mislead other Christian brethren about the true doctrine of the Catholic Church." (32)

Do I use devotional materials which see Mary continuing the role she had before Pentecost as the one who intercedes before her Son for the on-going gift of the Holy Spirit—the unity of all Christians and, indeed, of all human beings (Lumen Gentium 69)?

Is there anything about my devotional practices which might mislead non-Catholics about the true doctrine of the Church concerning Mary?

E) Devotions should pay "close attention to . . . the human sciences" (34) so that "Mary can be considered a mirror of the expectations of the men and women of our time." (37)

Do my Marian devotions highlight Mary as the "perfect model of the disciple of the Lord: the disciple who builds up the earthly and temporal city while being a diligent pilgrim towards the heavenly and eternal city, the disciple who works for that justice which sets free the oppressed and for that charity which assists the needy; but above all, the disciple who is the active witness of that love which builds up Christ in people's hearts" (37)?

F) There should be a "serene freedom" in regard to the rosary and, by extension, to any devotion. People "should be drawn to [the rosary's] calm recitation by its intrinsic appeal." (55)

- ❑ Do I feel serenely free with respect to my Marian devotions?
- ❑ Do I allow my fellow Catholics this serene freedom?

### **Devotion is for Communion**

What a challenging check-list! Liberating too, because it reminds that all devotions and all spirituality are meant to keep us in communion with God and with the Church. In his *Summa* St. Thomas discusses devotion before he discusses prayer because, according to the tradition he had received from Augustine and others down through the centuries, devotion is prior to prayer, either personal or liturgical. Thomas defines prayer as “the interpreter of desire” and the “unfolding of one’s will before God” (II-II, 83:1; III, 21, 1). In order to have something to pray about, one must first discover and/or kindle desire by devotion (II-II, 82).

The Church canonizes the Saints and recommends Sacred Activities and Holy Things—devotions—to move us away from the loneliness and sulkiness and narrowness caused by original sin and our own sins into the fellowship, joy, and infinity of the Trinity. We can be distracted from ourselves and attracted to communion with God and neighbor either in transitory ways (we can and should expect to outgrow some devotions) or in permanent ways (there are some “sure-fire,” long-term, and indispensable devotions).

Examples of permanent devotions begin with devotion to *persons*, especially Mary, and devotion to *sacred activities*, especially prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, and devotion to *holy things*, such as holy water. No Catholic should expect to outgrow these, though they may pass through particular devotions, like to

St. Gerard Majella or blessing oneself as an ambulance passes or the use of St. Anne's oil. Some devotions like some kinds of prayer are designed to get us started in the spiritual life; others accompany us all the way to heaven.

Sometimes we can tell the difference ourselves, as when the devotion has no more attraction for us or when a particular kind of prayer goes dry; other times we're meant to persevere until new life springs from the seemingly barren soil of devotion or prayer. Sometimes it takes a spiritual director or friend to help us see the difference. But there's always help from special "spiritual friends"—the Tradition of the Church and its authentic interpreter, the teaching office of the Church. The magisterial checklist provided here hopes to foster a renewal in healthy devotion to our Lady and a revitalized Marian spirituality in the Church.

**Resource List:**

Collection of Masses of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992 or New York City: Catholic Book Publishing Company, 1992). Volume One is the Sacramentary and Volume Two is the Lectionary.

Marialis Cultus (Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary) (Washington, DC: USCC Publications Office, 1974).

The Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary (New York City: Catholic Book Publishing Company, 1988). The official revised text.

"Come into the Dance: Marian Devotion and Liturgical Life Today" by Paul F. Ford, *Liturgical Life*, Office for Worship of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, May 1990. Copies are available from the Office at 1531 West Ninth Street, Los Angeles, CA 90015-1194, (213) 251-3262.

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