

# INTRODUCTION

## MOTHER OF ALL BELIEVERS

My devotion to Mary began when I was very young. When asked about the beginnings of my devotion to Our Lady, I often remark that I came out of the womb loving her. But I didn't grow up in a pious, Rosary-praying family. My mother was nominally Catholic at best, and I don't remember her going to church with my grandmother and me very often. Perhaps the lack of maternal affection I experienced as a child led me to Mary, a mother who would not fail me. It was my grandmother, the EWTN-watching, Rosary-praying daily communicant who modeled the faith for me.

I started reading books about Mary at a very young age. Then, growing up in the age of the internet, I browsed Catholic topics, especially seeking out information on the Blessed Virgin. That led me to an online forum of Catholics seeking to deepen their faith and devotion together. I'm sure that is when I first met St. Louis de Montfort—in a

forum topic post. I remember going to a used book website and typing “*True Devotion to Mary*” in the search bar at the age of twelve or thirteen. I bought a very antiquated copy of the book and tried to read it. I promise you I didn’t understand much!

At nineteen, I went on a summer pilgrimage to a place of purported Marian apparition in Europe in order to discern my priestly vocation. As part of the process, a friend of mine who also went on the trip and I began the process of Marian consecration through a small preparation book before we left. To be honest, I didn’t do all thirty-three days on thirty-three separate days; I jammed the exercises into something more like twenty-five days because I would forget on some days to do the devotion.

As a camp counselor that summer, I would go into the chapel during my scheduled break and undertake the day’s reading and prayers for the consecration preparation. I didn’t understand it all and found that there were many prayers to pray. Nevertheless, I tried to do the devotion and preparation to the best of my poor ability, hoping that my small act of devotion would somehow be pleasing to God. When August 15, the Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, came around during that pilgrimage, my friend and I consecrated ourselves together to Jesus through Mary before a statue of the Blessed Virgin at the Marian apparition site.

Even though I didn’t follow the steps for consecration perfectly, I learned pretty quickly that Marian consecration

is taking the next step in the spiritual life. It is a renewal of one's baptismal promises and an acceptance of Jesus' invitation to take Mary into your home as John the Beloved did. Mary is the mother of all believers in virtue of this office given to her by her son, but through consecration, one truly accepts Mary as mother, model, intercessor, and mediatrix. I came to understand this as I lived out my consecration and committed to praying to Mary regularly. Though I can't say I learned it from de Montfort's writing, that doesn't mean they don't contain great riches.

Despite my degrees in theology, I sometimes have to reread de Montfort's sentences and paragraphs two or three times. If you have read or attempted to read *True Devotion to Mary*, you know what I mean: the text is dense, and he writes like a person who lived in the 1700s. Well, that's because he did! The imagery of slavery that he uses, for example, may confuse and repel American readers today because we tend to think of how we cruelly enslaved our fellow brothers and sisters. His theological insights can also feel overly complex. As a Marian theologian, I am frequently asked to bring clarity to de Montfort's writings. I also hear all too often from people trying to read *True Devotion to Mary* who can't make their way through it. My hope is that in the pages that follow, we can break open the riches of de Montfort's writings and discover the beauty of total devotion to Our Lady. We will learn more about St. Louis de Montfort, his influences, and those he has influenced on Day 1 of our personal retreat.

You picked up this book because something about the topic struck you. Perhaps you have found *True Devotion to Mary* difficult and are hoping this book will be the key to unlocking its depths. I pray that our Triune God and the Blessed Virgin will assist me in accomplishing this task. It could be that you are curious about Marian consecration. Perhaps you have heard people talk about it for years and have never been comfortable with it yourself, but now you are ready to understand the next stage of Marian devotion—total consecration to Jesus through Mary. Or maybe you're already consecrated and want to renew your devotion. It's also possible that you want to begin some sort of Marian devotion for the first time. This personal retreat is a good first step in learning more about Marian consecration.

In preparation for this Marian retreat with the thought and writings of St. Louis de Montfort, it is important for us to conduct an interior examination regarding the role of Mary in our life. Spend a few minutes thinking about these questions:

- What role has Mary played in my life thus far?
- Do I have any reservations about Mary?
- How am I already devoted to Mary?
- Do I want a better relationship with Mary and her son?
- What do I hope to gain from this personal retreat?

Marian devotion is different for every person. For some, it could be the invocation of a Marian title and the

words “pray for us.” For others, it is Marian prayers like the Hail Mary, the Memorare, the Sub Tuum, and so many others. Or a person might travel the world, visiting Marian shrines. Wherever you are in your devotion to Mary, St. Louis de Montfort has something to offer you. Countless saints, popes, clergy, and holy men and women have turned to him as a guide for their spiritual life. I am hoping to walk with you through these pages as we encounter his thought and devotion.

God is at work through Marian consecration; it is powerful, and it changes lives. In November 2016, I knew I needed a change in my life; given that Advent was approaching, followed by January 1, the Solemnity of Mary, the Holy Mother of God, I chose to undergo the thirty-three days of preparation for renewing my Marian consecration. The new Marian consecration book I used encouraged the reader to take on a special penance for the thirty-three days, so I did. Those thirty-three days were grace-filled: God was at work, accomplishing something marvelous in my soul. The truth is, God wants to do that with you, when you begin your journey to consecrating your life to Jesus through Mary. He has done marvelous things in the lives of so many people I know.

I know of one woman who, through the process of consecration, renounced the lifestyle of drugs to which she was enslaved and is now a lay evangelist. Another person took on a new music ministry because of their consecration. And my friend who accompanied me on that vocation

discernment pilgrimage and consecrated himself alongside me on August 15, 2008, ended up finding the love of his life while in seminary. He withdrew from formation and is now married to, and has several children with, a woman who had consecrated herself on that same day! As you consecrate your life to Jesus through Mary, God wants to do great things for you too.

Over the next ten days, we will meet St. Louis de Montfort and learn much about Mary through exploring his thought and our Catholic intellectual tradition. Each day of our retreat is dedicated to a title of Mary extracted from or inspired by *True Devotion to Mary*. We will use those titles to open up the wealth of knowledge St. Louis de Montfort presents and examine how it applies to us in our personal spiritual journey, life with Christ, and devotion to Mary.

You can structure the following ten days in whatever way you like. You may choose to read the meditation and then pray the Rosary, especially if the Rosary isn't a part of your daily life; or you might choose to pray the Marian prayer that follows the meditation. Together, we are on a journey to Jesus through the heart of Mary, with St. Louis de Montfort as our guide. If the journey we are about to embark on is like that of the many saints who have been inspired by his writings, it will be life changing—if we let it be. Let us pray for an open heart so that God might accomplish his work in us.

## LET US PRAY, TODAY AND ALWAYS

O Lord, our God, you have been at work throughout all of history. I am inspired by the holy men and women who have preceded me on the journey of faith. I stand in awe of their wisdom and your action in their lives. Thank you for the example of St. Louis de Montfort and his love for Mary. I want to take Mary into my home and heart. I want her to be my mother and intercessor. As a poor sinner, I rely on her prayers. I know you want to accomplish wonderful things in my life. Open my mind and heart to what you want to say to me. Help me to love Mary as you love her, and may she accomplish her purpose, which is always to lead me to a deeper love of Jesus.

Our Lady, Mother of All Believers, pray for us.  
St. Louis de Montfort, pray for us.

## DAY 1

# QUEEN OF ALL SAINTS

We often hear Mary described as the Queen of All Saints, but in order to fully appreciate that title for her, we need to examine what saints mean to today's Catholics. We all know that the saints are highly quotable (though sometimes the saint never said the attributed words). We turn the sayings of saints into T-shirts, coffee mugs, and social media memes.

One way we can ensure that the quotes we share or tweet are really from the saints is to have recourse to their writings. I make marginal notes like "Tweet this" in books written by saints if I think other people could benefit from a quote, and it seems that other Catholics do something similar. A simple Twitter search for "St. Louis de Montfort" yields numerous tweets about his writings, including his most significant work on Marian devotion, *True Devotion to Mary*. These are powerful one-liners that can get people thinking and begin discussions about the Blessed Virgin



Mary and her role in salvation history. Here are a couple of tweets about our quotable saint:

St. Louis De Montfort says Mary is our Mother and our friend. She is the empress of the universe and loves us more than all the mothers and the queens of the world have ever loved any one human being. I wholeheartedly agree. (@DoggoDan2)

Brought me from looking into Catholicism as a protestant who didn't understand Mary to joining the Church. There's a reason I Made St. Louis de Montfort my confirmation saint. (@bredemontfort, December 14, 2020)

The impact of St. Louis de Montfort on people's lives is incredible. His teachings on the Rosary transformed my prayer life, and I have shared many of them in my talks and writings. For example, he encourages us to insert a phrase after the name of Jesus in the Hail Mary to remind us of the mystery we are celebrating during each decade of the Rosary. So we might say “. . . blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus, *crucified*” or “. . . Jesus, *risen from the dead*.” St. Louis also encourages group recitation of the Rosary because you gain the graces of all the Rosaries prayed.

The writings, teachings, and sayings of the saints are powerful. But do you know who is more powerful? The Blessed Virgin Mary—the woman St. Louis de Montfort

wants you to grow in love for and devotion to. Sainly men and women throughout time have known about Mary's power. The devil does too (we will examine that further on Day 3).

I fully believe that if you choose to consecrate yourself to Mary, God is going to rock your world. You are going to encounter saintly wisdom for your soul that will deepen your love for Mary and allow you to offer your fiat to God as Mary did when she said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord" (Lk 1:38).

The hymn "Stainless the Maiden" is the English version of a Polish hymn that I've used at times for my own prayer and meditation. During Advent, for example, the line "Think of her gladness when at last she saw Him: God in a manger, Bethlehem a Heaven!" places me there at the manger, watching how Mary responds to seeing God made man, the fruit of her fiat conceived by the Holy Spirit. Another line of the hymn captures the devotion of the saints: "Every saint has praised her." It's true!

It's important to note that when we say "praise her," we don't mean "worship her." We as Catholics are often accused of this. It is simply not true, and our Church uses precise theological language to talk about this. *Latria* is the worship we give to God alone. *Dulia* is the honor or veneration we give to the saints. We call the veneration we give to Mary *hyperdulia*; because of her role in mediating salvation to us through the Incarnation, she has a higher role than the saints. The saints have understood this

and have realized that Mary is the secret to holiness. They have praised her based on her powerful witness and words recorded in the gospels, reflecting and meditating about her in their writings and preaching.

Some saints have been devoted to her in very explicit ways. Some may have received an apparition of Our Lady or had a profound experience of prayer in which they came to realize that she was their mother. The very earliest saints devoted to the Blessed Mother were the apostles. After Jesus' death on Good Friday, I can only imagine that Mary, who needed to be consoled herself, had to console the apostles because they abandoned Jesus in his hour of need. Most devoted of those chosen by Christ was probably St. John, who received the command of Jesus to "behold, your mother!" (Jn 19:27); and as the evangelist records, from that hour the beloved disciple took Mary into his home. Just as Jesus was raised by Mary and lived with her before his public ministry, now John the Beloved lived with Mary and had this close association with her. All of the apostles would have felt a connection to Mary because she was their link to Jesus. And for us devoted sons and daughters today, she is still that connection to Jesus.

A person need only examine Fr. Luigi Gambero's book *Mary and the Fathers of the Church* to see the development of Marian devotion in the first several hundred years after the birth of Jesus. When wrong teachings about Mary arose, her devotees such as St. Cyril of Alexandria and St. Jerome quickly came to her defense. In the Eastern

tradition, homilists of the early Middle Ages such as St. Germanus of Constantinople, St. John Damascene, and St. Andrew of Crete preached beautiful sermons about the glories of Mary.

Throughout the ages, Mary has formed friendships with holy men and women who realized they needed her prayers of intercession to fully live the Christian life. As Mary prayed for them and obtained grace from her son, they felt compelled and inspired to share her greatness and her role in their life. After the first millennium of Christianity, saints like St. Bernard of Clairvaux in the twelfth century and St. Alphonsus Liguori in the eighteenth century come to mind as promoters of Marian devotion. Evening Prayer for the Feast of St. Bernard calls him an “eminent preacher of the Virgin Mother’s glory.” And for those who pray the Liturgy of the Hours, the Office of Readings presents many of St. Bernard’s homilies; once you encounter his Marian sermons, you understand the richness contained therein.

Much of the same richness is found in the writings of St. Louis de Montfort, who seems to have known the lives and writings of the saints intimately. Whenever I read his works, I marvel over the access he had to their writings in the 1600s. Remember, he wasn’t living in the age of Google, where you can find anything under the sun in a few searches. St. Louis de Montfort drew upon the writings and thoughts of so many saints that he must either have had an exhaustive library or have heard the teachings and

sayings of the saints and then committed them to memory. He brings out the writings of St. Denis the Areopagite, Abbot Rupert, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, St. Bonaventure, St. Vincent Ferrer, St. Bernadine of Siena, and so many others.

When you read de Montfort's *True Devotion to Mary*, you are reading and meditating on a book that reflects our Catholic tradition, bringing together the thinking of the saintly men and women who preceded him. As de Montfort introduces the reader and devotee to his Marian program of spirituality, he successfully integrates it within the Catholic tradition. As you read this classical work of spirituality, I encourage you to spend time with the quotes of the saints. When you encounter their words in the text, pause for a moment, and sit with the quote, reflecting on what it means to you. Ask yourself, "Do I have any questions about what this saint is saying?" And of course, if something St. Louis de Montfort says gives you pause, either because of its beauty or because of its complexity, spend time reflecting on it, and see what God wants to tell you through it.

Another point about *True Devotion to Mary* is that this text, which was lost for more than a century, has formed saintly men and women. St. Louis de Montfort died in 1716, and the manuscript was found in a trunk in 1842. More than 175 years later, this spiritual classic has been part of the spiritual formation of many popes, saints of modern times, and other holy men and women, and soon you too will be reading it.