



32. The Psychology of Marian Devotion

Although Schoenstatt's devotion to Mary, which has developed out of the covenant of love of 1914, is founded on the Blessed Mother's objective position and is therefore based on Church teaching, it is nevertheless timely and hence particularly relevant today, both pedagogically and psychologically. There is an interplay between grace and nature; the order of creation and the order of redemption are mutually dependent.

The devotion to Mary that broke through in the Marian Sodality in Schoenstatt in May 1914, and which proved itself in the time that followed, particularly in the wartime service of the Sodalists, found literary expression in the magazine "MTA", which was founded in 1916.

In January 1917 a Pastoral Conference on the education of youth took place in Düsseldorf, during which Professor Rademacher, a pastoral theologian in Bonn, read a paper on the pastoral value of devotion to Mary and the saints. In it he evaluated the testimonies given in the "MTA". The warm devotion to Mary that found expression in the "MTA" was criticised by the Secretary General before the paper was printed. He said it wasn't "down-to-earth" enough for the youth associations to be able to copy. He also noted that most young people lack the correct starting point for devotion to Mary, that is, an unshakable childlike relationship to their physical mothers.

Fr Kentenich answered this reservation in a letter of 8 April 1917 to Professor Rademacher, with whom he had already conducted a correspondence. In it he presented the psychological background to the Marian devotion cultivated in Schoenstatt, and explained why he considered it generally applicable to all young people. The text that follows is the main body of this letter.

It might be worthwhile to draw attention to the fact that although Fr Kentenich justified the Marian devotion that had grown in Schoenstatt in psychological terms, he did not explain it only on the basis of psychology. Grace always plays an essential role and intensifies what is cultivated in human nature.

We are dealing here with an early text written by Fr Kentenich in 1917. The language, which in the meantime dates back almost a hundred years, sounds somewhat antiquated. However, it bears

witness to the style of letter writing of that time, and to the way priests communicated with each other.

The text is taken from Ferdinand Kastner, *Unter dem Schutze Mariens – Under the Protection of Mary – Paderborn, 1939, pp. 254-260.*

... The spirit, the life, that is reflected in the “MTA” has to be judged as a more mature, not as the final and generally achievable effect of a planned interplay, and at times even a competition, between nature and grace. I would like to call this effect a relatively high degree of the triumph of grace over brittle human nature. Consequently, it is only possible to prove two things from the material:

- a) the fruitfulness of devotion to Mary, which is the root of the Sodality’s spirituality;¹¹⁶
- b) the psychological starting points, which devotion to Mary finds in the heart of young people.

Grace does not destroy nature, on the contrary, it pervades and perfects it. Whatever slumbers in it, is awakened to life by grace. The more perfectly grace reigns, the more perfectly the germinal aptitude of human nature is utilized and developed. Since, however, the devotion to Mary in the “MTA” presupposes a relatively high degree of the triumph of grace over human nature, I consider the material presented really suitable for psychological analysis. ...

If the enclosed letter is of the opinion that the devotion to Mary in the “MTA” is not down-to-earth enough to be copied in the associations for young people, I readily agree, but immediately add that it cannot be copied anywhere, either in other Missionary Houses or Convents. The purpose and goal, especially if grace plays the decisive role, cannot be copied; at best it can be prayed and striven for, in the sense that, insofar as our own co-operation comes into question, someone can carefully search for and try out the means that could lead to the goal.

So what are the means I usually employ?

Essentially they are the same that any leader of an association can employ. In order to give you a slight insight, I will write you some of my thoughts on the psychological analysis of devotion to Mary.

1. **The act of devotion to Mary** is *formaliter simplex, virtualiter triplex*, or to express it unphilosophically: it has three components: profound respect, trust and love. The formal object of the individual components is the Blessed Mother – her greatness (*Domina – Regina*), her power (*Advocata*), her love (Mother). Accordingly the one who honours Mary enters into a threefold relationship with Mary: *Servus* (servant, knight), *Client* (client), *Filius* (child). This is briefly expressed on the title page of our “MTA” in the formula of consecration: *Eligo te in Dominam, Matrem, Advocatum, tuere me Servum, Clientem, Filium tuum.*¹¹⁷

- a) Every **act of devotion to Mary must be composed of profound respect, trust and love**, even if to a very limited degree.

¹¹⁶ “MTA” I, p. 59.

¹¹⁷ I choose you to be my Queen, Mother and Advocate. Accept me as your servant, client and your child.

b) It will **differ from individual to individual** depending on the aptitude and needs of the individual subject, or how one or the other component dominates. So St Stanislaus can be seen as the typical representative of childlike, and St John Berchmans as a typical representative of chivalrous devotion to Mary.

c) **The degree of devotion to Mary** is determined by the degree of the individual components, or of one or the other of them.

2. **Each habit is brought about *per repetitio actuum*,**¹¹⁸ the psychological action of connecting the formal object with the soul. The formal object in our case is the greatness, power and love of the Blessed Mother. These simple truths are most important for the educator and pastor of young people, whether he is working as spiritual director of an association, or fatherly friend and counsellor of the individual (spiritual director, confessor).

a) Both the leader of an association and the pastor have to understand how to use the language of young people; they must personally be thoroughly versed, in theory and practice, in Church teaching and asceticism, and especially in Marian teaching and devotion, or at least do all they can to acquire this knowledge. It is especially important for them, if the worst comes to the worst, to free themselves from all fetters that earlier, false influences in the religious field have laid upon them.

b) The leader of an association must acquire the art of making convincing, enthusiastic and warming use in his talks of his secure and deep Mariological knowledge from the three points-of-view mentioned above. In the process he may not fail to take into account that puberty, no matter how uniform its characteristics may otherwise be, nevertheless has many and varied manifestations and gradations. He must recognise them, so that he can adapt himself psychologically and bring up at one moment the knight, the next the child, in his young people.

c) The most fruitful, and perhaps also the most difficult, part is the pastoral treatment of the individual. Depending on the disposition of the individual and his current needs, it is necessary to give him an understanding of the individual components, to elicit the corresponding psychological action, and through constant repetition to consolidate it into a habit that secures an individual and organic development, and the most fruitful possible use of true love for Mary. Of course, to do this one needs some psychological and theological knowledge, but not a great deal of time, at least not more than is required to fulfil the demands made on one by modern care for young people, and the repercussions of the Düsseldorf Conference.¹¹⁹ The assembly, for example, applauded Könn's discussion of the individual treatment of penitents and communicants. They are known to you, Reverend Father, from his writings. If you give the means he recommended a Marian colouring, for example, by choosing a subject from Mariology; asking the penitent to have a short spiritual reading about the Mother of God as a penance; getting the penitent used to praying the prayer "My Queen, my Mother ..." every morning and evening; asking him to pray his night prayer while kneeling, to practice a small act of self-discipline, or to fight against a fault, especially his main fault, but always out of love, gratitude, or chivalrous deference to the Blessed Mother. These are little things, but they lead to the goal. They are only meant to be points of contact for grace, which has

¹¹⁸ The repetition of an action, hence, through practice.

¹¹⁹ A Pastoral Conference on the Education of Youth from 2-4 January 1917, where Prof. Rademacher read a paper, which gave rise to Fr Kentenich's answer.

to do the main work. In brief, love for Mary, devotion to Mary, may not be isolated, or taught and practiced as a sideline. Whoever wants to experience their whole blessing, or give others access to them, will have to make it his formal principle of education that gives all other educational means a certain colouring, fertilises them, and is fertilised by them in their turn. So all Marian Sodalities should do everything **through Mary, with Mary, like Mary.**

3. **An enlightened pastorate is not satisfied** with adapting Marian devotion to current needs by using sensitive theological and philosophical understanding alone. It sees a further main task in **awakening, deepening and intensifying new needs.** Here we again see clearly the organic connection between love for Mary and the whole system of education. All the demands of modern care for young people, as they were discussed in Düsseldorf, can be repeated in this context. They must only be re-grouped according to the above-mentioned points-of-view. I shall merely give a few hints:

a) Respect and chivalry presuppose a general understanding of moral and religious greatness as a means of transforming the youthful urge to show strength and greatness into conquering the young person's inner world and spreading and deepening God's kingdom here on earth (self-sanctification and the apostolate). The means to awaken such an understanding, to awaken the need and continue developing it to become action (an apostolic sense, apostolate), were given in the various papers (by Prof. Mausbach and Dr Nieder). Besides this, Förster's¹²⁰ suggestions, which show such knowledge of life today, and which are contained in two brochures that quote experiments by Dr Krucken and the writings of Könn, could do great service in helping young people to arrive at correct self-knowledge and chivalrous self-assertion. Once the ground has been prepared, it is easy to make the developing man a knight in the service of the Blessed Mother, just as the idea of the Queen and Sovereign of his heart will once again gradually penetrate his whole being as though with magic power, and lend wings to his chivalrous thirst for action in a way hitherto considered unimaginable.

b) In order to deepen the need for trust (*Advocata – Cliens*) and love (*Mater – Filius*), the current natural relationship between mother and child at this age on the whole offers very few fruitful starting points. The letter of the Secretary General states that "a family sense and attachment to the mother are sometimes strongly reduced". I would like to replace the word "sometimes" with "often", and extend this "often" equally to my young people and the youth of our people. However, I have not yet made any experiments or studies in this regard. Consider that my young people are also going through puberty, during which they spontaneously want to feel independent, and so cast off all fetters, and greatly relax the bonds between mother and child. Besides this our young men only spend one holiday a year at home, so they are very rarely surrounded by tangible maternal love. They feel these limitations much less because of the greater benefits for mind and body they experience here. Does the letter writer seriously believe that missionary students (I am deliberately using the plural form) – German, not French – in puberty, express their natural child-like love as tenderly as their supernatural love for the Blessed Mother in the "MTA"?

¹²⁰ Among the many names mentioned in this paragraph, special mention must be made of Friedrich Wilhelm Förster (1869-1966), who, besides his political and philosophical works, promoted a new method of education to form the character, which was closely related to Fr Kentenich's, so much so that whole passages were quoted from Förster's works in the Pre- Founding Document.

At any rate I have never emphatically pressed the button at this point, because it is unpsychological. Psychology follows a completely different course, which nevertheless easily reaches its goal everywhere, if our young people are educated in the way pointed out at the course. The young person's relationship to his mother is also relaxed even if she lives a morally faultless life, because the lad no longer needs it, he is no longer so helpless. Yet in this instance nature and supernature move in opposite directions. While the developing man stretches and extends himself physically and mentally, becoming stronger and more autonomous, his intellectual and supernatural life is more endangered than ever by awakened passions, as well as by his seductive surroundings, etc. He feels inwardly weak and helpless like a tiny child. This is the Archimedean point if I manage to make the young man aware of his helplessness. It isn't difficult. The educator of young people is already working with understanding for the correct evaluation of their developing religious and moral strengths; he is treating his penitents individually according to Könn's applauded demands, that is, he is helping them to recognise, confess and battle their specific faults. Now he has to take the next step. Despite the young man's genuine and best resolutions, he repeatedly fails. "You can see how weak and helpless we are on our own!"

In his lectures, the President sketched a clearly defined and clear picture of Mary's kindness, power and maternal love. When he is counselling souls privately, the educator points to this warmly and convincingly at the right moment in order to enkindle warmth and conviction. Grace is added to this. We can be sure we won't have to wait for it. Then you will see how the words "heavenly Mother" soon acquire a new resonance, even if the student loves his own mother very warmly. Compare the childlike and warm love for Mary expressed on p. 89 of the "MTA" with p. 90, where you will find this telling sentence, "I have started to come closer to my physical mother." ... Our Sodalists' love for Mary is finding strong expression in various forms, not, as the enclosed letter mistakenly and misleadingly states, because they are missionary students, but because they joined the army with the education essentially demanded by the course also for the youth of our people, and because active service with its dangers made them uniquely aware of their spiritual and often physical helplessness (under fire), and because grace gladly and richly adapted itself to this state and their psychologically oriented work on themselves. It is more than just a conjecture when I say that also the youth of our nation, if they are educated according to the directives of the Düsseldorf course, and in the form I have described, will experience similar effects. *A priori* it can be demonstrated according to the same psychological laws, which essentially apply to both parties. And *a posteriori*?¹²¹ I have collected some letters from simple soldiers, young men of the people. Of course, they are readers of the "MTA". However, this only confirms my assumption that the psychological analysis of this and similar material will only support my opinions.

¹²¹ *A priori*: in advance; *a posteriori*: with hindsight.