

ALLOCUTIO February 2015, Fr. Justin Ford, Senatus Spiritual Director



In Part 1, Chapter 2 of *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*, St Louis de Montfort speaks about the marks of false devotion to Mary, and then the marks of authentic devotion. Today we'll start to consider the seven kinds of *false* devotion that he deals with: (i) the critical; (ii) the scrupulous; (iii) the superficial; (iv) the presumptuous; (v) the inconstant; (vi) the hypocritical; and (vii) the self-interested. As we read St Louis' account, doubtless we'll recognise some these 'marks' from our own experience. Our aim obviously isn't to judge others or to remain complacent ourselves, but simply to recognise the dangers and especially to avoid them in our own devotion.

First, the **critical**. St Lou is explains that as mainly meaning scholars who have a vague sort of devotion to Mary, but who disdain the devotions of simple people and who are sceptical of every story of miracles, every story testifying to Our Lady's mercy and power – even those recorded by trustworthy authors. That's an important qualification. St Louis isn't saying we should be completely gullible about everything we hear, but simply that we should be open, and have a balanced approach.

He goes on, 'They cannot bear to see simple or humble people on their knees before an altar or statue of Our Lady, or at prayer before some outdoor shrine. They even accuse them of idolatry as if they were adoring the wood or the stone.'

It's interesting to know that the disdain of some intellectuals for popular devotions isn't just a modern thing – it was there in the Church when St Louis was writing three hundred years ago in 1712.

I'm also reminded of a beautiful passage from Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 'The Joy of the Gospel'. Speaking about popular piety, he writes, 'To understand this reality we need to approach it with the gaze of the Good Shepherd, who seeks not to judge but to love... I think of the steadfast faith of those mothers tending their sick children who, though perhaps barely familiar with the articles of the creed, cling to a rosary; or of all the hope poured into a candle lighted in a humble home with a prayer for help from Mary, or in the gaze of tender love directed to Christ crucified. No one who loves God's holy people will view these actions as the expression of a purely human search for the divine...' (125)

Closing this section, St Louis sums up the consequences of this overly critical approach: 'These false devotees, these proud worldly people are greatly to be feared. They do untold harm to devotion to Our Lady. While pretending to correct abuses, they succeed only too well in turning people away from this devotion.'

The second kind of false devotion is what St Louis calls the devotion of the **scrupulous**. By that he means those who fear they are slighting the Son by honouring the Mother, and who place devotion to Jesus and devotion to Mary in opposition, rather than hand in hand.

St Louis writes, 'They cannot bear to see people giving to Our Lady the praises due to her... It annoys them to see more people kneeling before Mary's altar than before the Blessed Sacrament, as if these acts were at variance with each other, or as if those who were praying to Our Lady were not praying through her to Jesus... Here are some of the things they say: "What is the good of all these rosaries, confraternities and exterior devotions... We should go directly to Jesus since he is our sole Mediator..." There is some truth in what they say, but the inference they draw to prevent devotion to Our Lady is very insidious... For we never give more honour to Jesus than when we honour his Mother, and we honour her simply and solely to honour him all the more perfectly.'

The third kind of false devotion is that of the **superficial** – those whose devotion consists only in exterior practices: many rosaries said with great haste, many Masses assisted at distractedly. 'They take part in processions of Our Lady without inner fervour. They join her confraternities without reforming their lives... All that appeals to them is the emotional aspect of this devotion, but the substance of it has no appeal at all. If they do not *feel* a warmth in their devotions, they think they are doing nothing; they become upset, and give up everything, or else do things only when they feel like it.'

In the first two kinds of false devotion, we saw those who were contemptuous or fearful about the *external* practices of devotion. Here St Louis considers those who go to the opposite extreme, those whose devotion consists *only* in external actions and depends on fickle emotions. This contrasts with the authentic practice, which *combines* inner and outer devotion. The interior devotion is the essential aspect, but we do not neglect 'a reasonable external expression which always accompanies true devotion'.