



WEEK ONE

St. Louis de Montfort

This week, we'll focus on the example and words of the first great prophet of Marian consecration. We'll begin by learning about his life, and then we'll ponder the essential aspects of his Marian teaching. [Please note: We do not have space here to cover every essential element of de Montfort's teaching. Omitted elements will be covered in later weeks.]

DAY 1

The Passionate Saint of Brittany

Take a look at a map of France. Now notice something about its shape. See how one part sticks way out almost as if it were running away from the rest of the landmass, ready to dive off into the Celtic Sea? That jutting arm in the northwest of the country is called “Brittany,” and that’s where St. Louis de Montfort grew up.

There’s something special about Brittany that seems to have had an influence on St. Louis: its Celtic roots. Brittany is considered one of the six Celtic nations, meaning that the Celtic language and culture still survive. (So, scratch that part about Brittany being ready to dive into the Celtic Sea. It’s already in and swimming.) And one part of Celtic culture seems to have seeped deeply into the heart of St. Louis: the high-spiritedness of its warriors.

From ancient times, Celtic warriors have struck terror in the hearts of their enemies. If you’ve ever seen the movie *Braveheart*, you know what I mean. Think of the fearless figure of Sir William Wallace (played by Mel Gibson) and his crazy crew of Scottish Highlanders who take on an English enemy many times their size. This shows something of the Celtic fighting spirit, but the real life version is even more intense.

Often wearing nothing but blue battle paint, real Celtic warriors would work themselves into a blood-thirsty frenzy, rush into combat screaming their heads off, and wildly slash, bash, and slice away at their enemies with huge, two-handed swords. These fierce fighting men, despite their lack of discipline, armor, and order, were extremely effective in battle because of their

unmatched passion and ferocity. Throughout history, nobody has wanted to mess with the crazy Celtic warriors.

St. Louis's dad, Jean Grignon, must have been descended from these wild-men warriors, for nobody wanted to mess with him either. In fact, he was known for having the most fiery temper in all of Brittany. As one author puts it, "He was a volcano frequently erupting."⁹ St. Louis, on the other hand, was as gentle as a lamb, right? Wrong. He confessed that his temper was just as bad as his father's. But Louis channeled his fiery passion not to threats and violence but to laboring for the greater Glory of God — well, except for the time he knocked out a couple of drunks who wouldn't stop heckling him while he preached. We can get a better sense of Louis's remarkable zeal if we reflect on his short but incredibly productive priestly life.

When he died in 1716, St. Louis was just 43 years old, having been a priest for only 16 years. Tireless labors to bring souls to Jesus through Mary, especially by his preaching an endless succession of parish missions, brought about his early death. As if these life-sapping labors weren't suffering enough, Louis had to bear vicious persecution from the clergy and Jansenist heretics,¹⁰ even to the point of being physically attacked and poisoned by them. Despite all this, our indomitable warrior kept advancing on the battlefield, continuously preaching his trademark path to Jesus through Mary. In fact, when leaders in the Church in France thought they had put an end to his work, Louis walked the thousand-mile journey to Rome and asked the Pope for his wisdom and counsel. The Pope not only told him to go back to France and continue preaching but awarded him the title "Apostolic Missionary." Obediently and joyfully, our saint returned to France where he continued to preach, write, and patiently bear his many sufferings out of love for Jesus, Mary, and souls.

St. Louis's passion and zeal lit a fire in a young Karol Wojtyła, the future Pope John Paul II. A few years before his death, the Pope was able to realize a lifelong dream and visit de Montfort's tomb. He said on that occasion, "I am happy to begin my pilgrimage in France under the sign of this great figure.

You know that I owe much to this saint, and to his *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*.¹¹

Now what about us? Do we have a fire in our hearts as we begin this retreat? We should. Or at least we should strive for it. Desire and generosity are key ingredients to making a successful retreat. May Mary intercede for us, and may the Holy Spirit fill us with a passion to conscientiously make these days of retreat, despite any fatigue, distractions, or obstacles. And let's remember that what we may have to endure in terms of the discipline of prayer is nothing compared to what St. Louis went through, and he'll be interceding for us. Relying on his intercession and that of the Mother of God, let's resolve right now to dedicate ourselves to this retreat with the intensity and zeal of a Celtic warrior — though without all the face-paint and screaming.

Today's Prayer:

Come, Holy Spirit, living in Mary.

Help me to make this retreat with generosity and zeal.

DAY 2

St. Louis's Influence on the Church

There's a story from St. Louis de Montfort's life that particularly expresses his passion, which we pondered just yesterday. In the town of Pontchâteau, St. Louis inspired the peasants to build a huge monument to the Passion of Christ on a neighboring hill. For 15 months, hundreds of peasants volunteered their skills and labor to build it. When completed, it stood as a massive structure, a real labor of love, and on the day before it was supposed to be dedicated by the bishop, word got back to Louis that his enemies had convinced the government to destroy it. (They had lied to the authorities, saying that the structure was actually meant to be a fortress against the government.) When Louis received this disappointing news, he told the thousands of people who had gathered for the blessing ceremony, "We had hoped to build a Calvary here. Let us build it in our hearts. Blessed be God."

One thing about doing the Lord's work: It doesn't always turn out according to our plans. For example, St. Louis surely had planned that his monument to Christ would last more than a day. Yet the saint obediently accepted the destruction of his plans and blessed God. Because of this kind of detachment from his own will and attachment to God's, Louis became an instrument used by God to accomplish even mightier works. So, although his physical monument was destroyed, Louis's teaching eventually became a huge edifice in the Church that exercised great influence on many Popes and on Catholic spirituality. Indeed, de Montfort's passionate labors paid off in the end, even if he didn't see the fruit himself.

As we are just beginning our preparation for consecration to Jesus through Mary, let's ponder some of the support various Popes have given to St. Louis's teaching. May the testimony of their support strengthen our resolve to journey on to Consecration Day, and may it help us to trust that our consecration truly will bear great fruit in our lives, even if we don't yet fully understand how.

- **Blessed Pope Pius IX** (1846-1878) stated that St. Louis's devotion to Mary is the best and most acceptable form.
- **Pope Leo XIII** (1878-1903) not only beatified de Montfort in 1888 but granted a Church indulgence to Catholics who consecrate themselves to Mary using de Montfort's formula. Moreover, this Pope was reportedly so influenced by St. Louis's efforts to spread the Rosary that he wrote 11 encyclicals on this preeminent Marian devotion.
- **Pope St. Pius X** (1903-1914), like Leo XIII, also recommended de Montfort's teaching on Mary to the faithful. In fact, he granted a plenary indulgence *in perpetuum* (in perpetuity) to anyone who would pray de Montfort's formula for Marian consecration, and he offered his own apostolic blessing to anyone

who would simply read *True Devotion*. This Pope so strongly encouraged the faithful to follow de Montfort's path of Marian devotion because he himself had experienced its power. In fact, in his Marian encyclical *Ad Diem Illum*, the saintly Pope expressed his own dependence on de Montfort in writing it, which becomes obvious when one compares it with *True Devotion*. The Pope's encyclical continually reflects the tone and spirit of de Montfort's classic work as evidenced by sentences like this: "There is no surer or easier way than Mary in uniting all men with Christ."

- **Pope Pius XI** (1922-1939) simply stated, "I have practiced this devotion ever since my youth."
- **Venerable Pope Pius XII** (1939-1958) canonized St. Louis in 1947 and, in his homily for the Mass of canonization, referred to de Montfort's Marian teaching as "solid and right." Then, when the Pope addressed the pilgrims who had come for the canonization, he said that de Montfort leads us to Mary and from Mary, to Jesus, thus summarizing the meaning of Marian consecration.
- **Blessed Pope John Paul II** (1978-2005) promoted de Montfort's teaching more than any other Pope. We'll learn more about this during the fourth week of the retreat. It's enough here to recall two amazing facts: First, that John Paul's papal motto was *Totus Tuus* ("totally yours"), which he took directly from de Montfort's shorter prayer of consecration; second, that John Paul described his reading of *True Devotion to Mary* as a "decisive turning point" in his life.

Today's Prayer:

Come, Holy Spirit, living in Mary.

Prepare me to give myself fully to living out this true and solid devotion.

DAY 3

De Montfort's Consecration (Part One)

Okay, so on the first day of this week, we asked for a greater passion and zeal in making our preparation for consecration. Then, yesterday, we pondered the incredible influence that de Montfort's brief life has had on the Church. The powerful testimony of authorities no less than Popes should have further fired our zeal and gotten us reflecting, "What is this amazingly influential teaching of a priest who only lived to be 43?" Of course, it's his teaching on Marian consecration, but what exactly does this mean?

Recall the summary of Marian consecration in the introduction to this retreat. There I presented consecration as our giving a "yes" to Mary, allowing her to fulfill in us her God-given task of forming us into other Christs. And that's all true. But there's more. Saint Louis gives two key emphases in his teaching on Marian consecration that expand what we've already read about it. These two emphases are (1) a renewal of our baptismal vows and (2) a particularly intimate gift of ourselves to Mary. Let's look at each of these in turn (one today and one tomorrow).

The day of our Baptism is the most significant in each of our lives. It's when we poor, sinful creatures are not only cleansed of sin but also given the amazing dignity and honor of being transformed into sons and daughters of the almighty God. On that joyous occasion, before we received this amazing grace, we solemnly promised (or if we were infants, others promised in our name) to reject Satan, and then we (or others in our name) professed our faith and commitment to Jesus Christ. Then, every Easter, we solemnly renew this promise and commitment. But do we keep it? Are we true to our word? No. We all sin. Sadly, we all give in to Satan's "pomps and works" and reject Christ, at least in little ways.

Why does this happen? The simple answer is original sin: We have a fallen nature and we're prone to sin. That's true, but St. Louis invites us to go deeper and examine our consciences. If we do, we'll discover that a principal reason why we fall into sin is because of forgetfulness, forgetfulness of our

promise and commitment to Christ at Baptism. De Montfort suggests that if we were to personally and sincerely renew our baptismal vows and place them in the hands of Mary, then this act alone would go a long way in helping us overcome sin in our lives. Therefore, he makes such a renewal of vows an essential element of his prayer of consecration. In fact, in the very first paragraph of this prayer, he has us address Mary and pray to her as follows:

I, (name), a faithless sinner, renew and ratify today in thy hands the vows of my Baptism; I renounce forever Satan, his pomps and works; and I give myself entirely to Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Wisdom, to carry my cross after Him all the days of my life, and to be more faithful to Him than I have ever been before.¹²

So, St. Louis has us attack sin right at its root — Satan and his pomps and works — has us recommit our lives to Christ, and has us do all of this with and through Mary. Why through Mary? Because God has put enmity between her and Satan (see Gen 3:15), and Satan can't stand her. In fact, according to St. Louis, Satan fears her not only more than the angels and saints but, in a sense, even more than God himself! Why? Because, as he puts it, "Satan, being proud, suffers infinitely more from being beaten and punished by a little and humble handmaid of God, and her humility humbles him more than the divine power."¹³ So, de Montfort gives us a practical and effective way to overcome sin in our lives: formally renounce Satan and recommit ourselves to Christ, through Mary.

We'll hear more about Mary's power over evil on the last day of this week. Tomorrow, we'll reflect on the second element of St. Louis's consecration, the particularly intimate gift of ourselves to Mary. Today, let's reflect on the promise we made at our Baptism to reject Satan and to love and follow Christ.

Today's Prayer:

Come, Holy Spirit, living in Mary.

Give me the grace to reject Satan and follow Christ more closely.

DAY 4

De Montfort's Consecration (Part Two)

Yesterday, I said that St. Louis gives two special emphases in his teaching on Marian consecration: (1) a renewal of our baptismal vows and (2) a particularly intimate gift of ourselves to Mary. We covered the first emphasis yesterday. Now let's look at the second, beginning by asking the question, "Why should we give ourselves to Mary?"

We should give ourselves to Mary in imitation of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. After all, didn't Jesus give himself to Mary from the moment of the Incarnation? Yes, he did. And aren't we called to imitate Christ? Yes, we are. But isn't Mary a creature? Yes she is, but she's unique. Not only is Mary free from sin and totally conformed to God's will, but by God's will and good pleasure — as we learned from the introduction — Mary has a special role in our sanctification. Therefore, we should give ourselves to the Mother of God, so she can help form us into saints, into other Christs. We should give her our yes. But St. Louis takes all of this a step further. His yes to Mary is particularly deep, a profoundly intimate gift of himself to Mary:

This devotion consists, then, in giving ourselves entirely to Our Lady, in order to belong entirely to Jesus through her. We must give her (1) our body, with all its senses and its members; (2) our soul, with all its powers; (3) our exterior goods of fortune, whether present or to come; (4) our interior and spiritual goods, which are our merits and our virtues, and our good works, past, present, and future.¹⁴

This fourth point is most interesting. By this aspect of our consecration to Mary — according to St. Louis — our gift of self to her goes even beyond what is required when people offer themselves to God through religious vows. For instance, by virtue of the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, a religious sister does not give God the right to dispose of the

grace of all her good works nor does she give up her merits. Allow me to bring into better focus just how radical a gift of oneself this Marian consecration really is.

First, in regard to others, if we give Mary the right to dispose of the graces of our good works, then this means we cannot unconditionally apply such graces to whomever we choose. So, for instance, if I make such an offering to Mary, I cannot insist that the graces from a sickness I am offering up go to the person I want them applied to. Second, in regard to ourselves, if we consecrate ourselves to Mary, then when we die, we won't get to appear before God clothed with the merits of our prayers and good works. In fact, we'll have to appear before God with empty hands, because we will have given all our merits to Mary.

If the radical nature of this offering has got you worried, don't be worried. Tomorrow, we'll see why this offering is not to be feared, and in fact, why it's incredibly beautiful and completely worth it. Until then, we can reflect on the second part of de Montfort's formula for Marian consecration, which speaks of this intimate gift of ourselves to Mary:

In the presence of all the heavenly court, I choose you this day for my Mother and Queen. I deliver and consecrate to you, as your slave, my body and soul, my goods, both interior and exterior, and even the value of all my good actions, past, present, and future; leaving to you the entire and full right of disposing of me, and all that belongs to me, without exception, according to your good pleasure, for the greater glory of God, in time and eternity.¹⁵

Today's Prayer:

Come, Holy Spirit, living in Mary.

Help me to give myself entirely to Jesus through Mary.

DAY 5

Should We Really Give Mary *Everything*? (Part One)

The second part of de Montfort's formula of consecration says that we should give Mary *everything*, including "our interior and spiritual goods, which are our merits and our virtues, and our good works, past, present, and future." Isn't this a bit too much? No. It's perfect. It's beautiful. Let's see why by learning how the offering affects others and ourselves.

In regard to others, when we fully consecrate ourselves to Mary, we lose the unconditional right to distribute the value of our prayers and good actions to others. In other words, we give the rights to the grace (merit) of our prayers to Mary. We're telling her, "Mary, I give you the right to distribute the grace of my prayers as you see fit."

Making such a gift to Mary has a big benefit. It ensures that the grace of our prayers will be used in the best way possible. It works like this: Because of her unique vantage point from heaven, and on account of her most intimate communion with her Divine Son, Mary can best determine which people are most in need of our prayers. For instance, seeing some forgotten person in China about to die in despair, Mary can take the grace of our prayers (and "offered up" sufferings) and use it to help that dying person to trust in God and accept his mercy.

Now, perhaps this idea has got some of us thinking:

Well, that's great. I'm happy to help the dying person in China, whom I don't know, but I'd be disappointed if I therefore couldn't use the grace of my prayers and good works to help the people I do know, like my family and friends. I'm worried that if I give Mary the right to distribute the grace of my prayers and good works, then I thereby lose the right to pray for those whom I especially love, even if they're less in need than other people in the world.

This is a legitimate concern, but there's no need to worry. Why? For two reasons: First, Mary makes the good things we give her more perfect. In other words, she augments, increases, and purifies the spiritual gifts and merits we give her. When we give them to her, because she makes them more perfect, there's more grace and merit to go around. St. Louis uses an unforgettable analogy to explain this:

It is as if a peasant, wishing to gain the friendship and benevolence of the king, went to the queen and presented her with a fruit which was his whole revenue, in order that she might present it to the king. The queen, having accepted the poor little offering from the peasant, would place the fruit on a large and beautiful dish of gold, and so, on the peasant's behalf, would present it to the king. Then the fruit, however unworthy in itself to be a king's present, would become worthy of his majesty because of the dish of gold on which it rested and the person who presented it.¹⁶

Here's the second reason we shouldn't worry: Mary is never outdone in generosity. So, if we're so generous as to give her the right to distribute the grace of our prayers and good works, she'll surely be especially generous to our loved ones. In fact, she'll take even better care of our loved ones than we ourselves can. For instance, let's say one of our family members or friends is in need of prayer, and we don't know it. Well, Mary knows it, and she'll make sure that that person doesn't go without. Giving Mary the right to distribute the grace of our prayers and good works doesn't mean we can't still pray for our loved ones. We can and should pray for them. It's just that we give Mary the final say in deciding to whom and for what purpose the grace of our prayers and good works should be applied.

Remember, Mary is not outdone in generosity. She especially hears the prayers of those of us who have given her everything — including the value of all our good works — and

she wants us to tell her of the people and intentions we hold in our hearts. If we've given her everything, is there any doubt that she'll be generous in giving whatever good we ask for to those who are dear to us?¹⁷

Today's Prayer:

Come, Holy Spirit, living in Mary.

Help me be generous in giving all I have to Mary.

DAY 6

Should We Really Give Mary *Everything*? (Part Two)

Okay, so yesterday we looked at how, when we fully consecrate ourselves to Mary, we give up the right to distribute the grace of our prayers and merits to others. But we saw that it all works out even better in the end. Now, today, we turn to ourselves. Isn't it crazy to give to Mary all the value of our good actions and prayers and so appear before God with empty hands? No, it's not crazy. Remember, Mary is not outdone in generosity. If we give her all our merits, she'll give us all of hers. And that's a big deal.

I once read a story about a saint on earth who had a vision of heaven. In her vision, she saw the saints in heaven and their different degrees of glory. With some saints, she was astonished because they had risen so high in glory as to be worshipping God with the Seraphim, the highest choir of angels. Another time, I read a passage in the *Diary of St. Faustina* in which Faustina had a similar vision of heaven. She related that if we were to see the differences among the degrees of glory in heaven, we would willingly suffer anything on earth just to move one degree higher.¹⁸ After reading these testimonies, I say to myself, "I not only want to go to heaven, but I want to reach the highest degree of glory in heaven that I possibly can." There's an easy way for us to do this: We give Mary everything. We rely not on our own merits but on hers. Saint Louis explains:

The most holy Virgin ... who never lets herself be outdone in love and liberality, seeing that we give our-

selves entirely to her ... meets us in the same spirit. She also gives her whole self, and gives it in an unspeakable manner, to him who gives all to her. She causes him to be engulfed in the abyss of her graces. She adorns him with her merits; she supports him with her power; she illuminates him with her light; she inflames him with her love; she communicates to him her virtues: her humility, her faith, her purity, and the rest. ... In a word, as that consecrated person is all Mary's, so Mary is all his.¹⁹

Now, despite these consoling words, one might still be troubled and say, "That's great! I'm all for having a high degree of glory in heaven. But what I'm worried about is purgatory. I'm afraid that if I give away all my merits, even to Mary, then I'll have to suffer in purgatory for a very long time." Saint Louis responds:

This objection, which comes from self-love and ignorance of the generosity of God and His holy Mother, refutes itself. A fervent and generous soul who gives God all he has, without reserve, so that he can do nothing more; who lives only for the glory and reign of Jesus Christ, through His holy Mother, and who makes an entire sacrifice of himself to bring it about — will this generous and liberal soul, I say, be more punished in the other world because it has been more liberal and more disinterested than others? Far, indeed, will that be from the truth! Rather, it is toward that soul ... that Our Lord and His holy Mother are the most liberal in this world and in the other, in the orders of nature, grace, and glory.²⁰

Okay, this settles it — and we get a gentle rebuke on top of it all. Saint Louis repeats the important point: Mary is not outdone in generosity! If we are especially generous with her, then she'll be especially generous with us. And he makes another good point: the gentle rebuke. He says that these kinds of

concerns come from self-love. So, yes, we should aim high. Yes, we should have holy ambition and want to reach the highest heights of holiness. But our motive should not be self-love; rather, it should be that we want to please God and give great glory to him. We should keep this important point in mind when, tomorrow, we read about some of the awesome benefits of being consecrated to Mary.

Today's Prayer:

Come, Holy Spirit, living in Mary.

Help me to give great glory to God by giving all I have to Mary.

DAY 7

A Quick, Easy, and Secure Way to Holiness

For the last two days, we've learned about some beautiful benefits of being consecrated to Jesus through Mary, benefits both to ourselves and to those who are closest to us. Today, on this final day of meditation on the teaching of St. Louis, we're going to focus on other benefits of Marian consecration. Specifically, we're going to learn about how Marian consecration is a quick, easy, and secure way to holiness. As we read about this, we should keep in mind that the gift of these benefits doesn't entitle us to just kick back and take it easy. (This would be the self-love that St. Louis rebuked during yesterday's reading.) Rather, when we see God's generosity in giving us such a great gift as Marian consecration, we should strive all the more ardently to live it out and grow in holiness.

Let's start with the quick and easy part: The way of consecration to Jesus through Mary is a quick and easy way to holiness. And what is holiness? Dying to self. And this definitely is not easy. Still, Marian consecration is a relatively quick and easy way along a path that by its very nature isn't easy and often takes a long time. Saint Louis introduces this way as follows:

As there are secrets of nature by which natural operations are performed more easily, in a short time

and at little cost, so also are there secrets in the order of grace by which supernatural operations, such as ridding ourselves of self, filling ourselves with God, and becoming perfect, are performed more easily.²¹

So how do we follow this quick and easy way? By giving ourselves to Jesus through Mary. Mary leads us to Jesus and makes the road to holiness quick and easy, even though she doesn't take away our crosses. In fact, those who are particularly beloved by Mary often have more crosses than others, but Mary makes the crosses sweet and light:

[I]t is quite true that the most faithful servants of the Blessed Virgin, being also her greatest favorites, receive from her the greatest graces and favors of Heaven, which are crosses. But I maintain that it is also the servants of Mary who carry these crosses with more ease, more merit, and more glory. That which would stay the progress of another a thousand times over, or perhaps would make him fall, does not once stop their steps, but rather enables them to advance; because that good Mother, all full of grace and of the unction of the Holy Spirit, prepares her servants' crosses with so much maternal sweetness and pure love as to make them gladly acceptable, no matter how bitter they may be in themselves; ... [it's] just as a person would not be able to eat unripe fruits without a great effort which he could hardly keep up, unless they had been preserved in sugar.²²

We make more progress in a brief period of submission to and dependence on Mary than in whole years of following our own will and relying upon ourselves.²³

By this practice, faithfully observed, you will give Jesus more glory in a month than by any other practice, however difficult, in many years.²⁴

[True devotees of Mary] have such facility in carrying the yoke of Jesus Christ that they feel almost nothing of its weight.²⁵

So, the way of Marian consecration truly is quick and easy, relatively speaking. As St. Louis says elsewhere, it's like the difference between a sculptor who makes a statue through long weeks of hard labor, hammering away with a chisel and another artist who makes the same statue quickly and easily by using a mold. Mary is the mold that forms us most perfectly, quickly, and easily into other images of Christ.²⁶

We'll now close these reflections on the wonderful benefits of Marian consecration by letting St. Louis describe how this way is also a *secure* path, meaning that, as we walk it, we're particularly protected from and defended against evil:

[Mary] puts herself around [her true children], and accompanies them "like an army in battle array" (Cant 6:3). Shall a man who has an army of a hundred thousand soldiers around him fear his enemies? A faithful servant of Mary, surrounded by her protection ... has still less to fear. This good Mother ... would rather dispatch battalions of millions of angels to assist one of her servants than that it should ever be said that a faithful servant of Mary, who trusted in her, had had to succumb to the malice, the number, and the vehemence of his enemies.²⁷

Today's Prayer:

Come, Holy Spirit, living in Mary.

Help me to praise you for such a quick, easy, and secure path to holiness!