

¶ Marian Consecration With Aquinas

MARIAN
CONSECRATION
WITH
AQUINAS

A Nine Day Path for Growing Closer
to the Mother of God

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INTRODUCTION

MARIAN CONSECRATION

Marian consecrations are all the rage in some quarters. Hip Catholics tote their *True Devotion* books around campus, organize *Morning Glory* prayer groups, and sport consecration chains without apology.

Yet in other circles, there is decidedly less Marian verve. Folks in secular settings or with Protestant friends sometimes find it hard to justify such a visible provocation. To take one of the more controversial elements of the faith and to make it the be-all and end-all seems to some a bit imprudent. Is this supposed to further the conversation or end it?

I (Matt) first learned about Marian consecration when I was serving as a missionary with NET Ministries of Canada. When it was introduced to me, I remember the thought freaking me out a bit. Leading up to that time, I was becoming more and more comfortable with invoking the saints in my own personal prayer and asking for their intercession. I had also enjoyed some success in warding off objections from my Protestant friends. Then all of the sudden, here's this talk about total consecration and slaves of Mary. I found it to be too much.

But at the prompting of my friends, I gave it a go. I made an honest attempt at reading St. Louis de Montfort, but—truth be told—I couldn't really get into it. I'd come across individual quotations that I found interesting or beautiful, but the overall approach never really appealed to me. His flowery language didn't resonate; it left me cold. Now, this isn't to say that the problem is his. Many find his writings inspiring, but—for whatever reason—I didn't. If patron saints are like heavenly friends, then you could say that we never hit it off.

For a while, I remained on the periphery of the consecration scene, but over the course of an ongoing conversion and coming to know the saints of the tradition, I discovered an approach that spoke to me. Later on, I heard consecration described as “entrustment,” and I found that more palatable. Again, I don't mean to suggest that the truth of a doctrine is a matter of taste, but—in my own case—presentation was a big part of whether or not to get on board. The language of entrustment—language that Aquinas uses in his prayer to Mary and that St. John Paul II uses in the modern magisterium—conveyed a sense that was more maternal and less cultic. I thought, “Yeah, that's a lot cooler.”

The point of this book is to offer another approach to Marian consecration. As we know from St. Maximilian Kolbe and Fr. Michael Gaitley, there isn't just one path to Marian consecration. Rather, there is a whole variety, and these can work well to captivate the different spiritual temperaments of a wide range of Christians.

So, as students and devotees of St. Thomas Aquinas, we wanted to put together this book for people who hear the

Gospel best when it is preached and explained in St. Thomas's idiom—for those who want to be formed by what he says about Marian consecration. As a result, this consecration will be a bit more theological than most. St. Thomas believed that it matters what you think and that when you know well, you are freer to love better. So, part of the aim of this preparation for consecration will be to instruct and enlighten, with the confidence that an illumined mind prompts a devoted heart.

ST. THOMAS AND THE VIRGIN MARY

St. Thomas, like many of the saints before and after him, had a great love for the Blessed Virgin Mary. While there are not many stories of his devotion to her, one early story is illustrative. As a small child, he was often seen toddling around his family home (well, it was a castle) with a piece of paper balled up in his fist. When his mother finally wrested it from his grasp, she saw that it read, “Ave Maria, gratia plena” (Hail Mary, full of grace).

St. Thomas's love for the Blessed Virgin comes out even more spectacularly in his writings. In the *Summa*, he asks the question, “Whether God can do better than what He does?” St. Thomas responds with a scriptural passage from St. Paul, “[God] is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think” (Eph 3:20). So, in short, yes, God could do better. For everything that he's made, we can imagine a better version or something else that bests it somehow. Picture your best friend. Now, picture him with wings. Bingo.

But, here's the thing. St. Thomas doesn't just leave it at that. In the reply to the fourth objection, he writes, "The humanity of Christ, from the fact that it is united to the Godhead; and created happiness from the fact that it is the fruition of God; and the Blessed Virgin from the fact that she is the mother of God; have all a certain infinite dignity from the infinite good, which is God. And on this account there cannot be anything better than these; just as there cannot be anything better than God" (ST Ia Q. 25, a. 6, ad4um). You heard right, St. Thomas just classed Mary with the humanity of Christ and created beatitude. Clearly, he esteems her greatly.

ST. THOMAS AND CONSECRATION

The next question naturally arises: Did St. Thomas even write anything about Marian consecration? To be perfectly honest, St. Thomas Aquinas never addresses the question of Marian consecration *directly*. That being said, we can get at his thoughts by approaching it from another angle. Consecration comes up in his writings on the sacraments, specifically when talking about Baptism, Confirmation, the Eucharist, and Holy Orders. But his teaching on consecration is clearest in the discussion of religious life.

After describing the theological and moral virtues—which God intends for all—St. Thomas shifts gears and concludes with a short section describing the charismatic graces and states of life—which God intends only for some. So, after passing through prophecy, rapture, tongues, words, and miracles (a pretty exciting section), he rounds out the scoring

with a treatment of religious life. (Don't worry, this isn't a vocation advertisement. It's safe to read on.)

In one of those questions, St. Thomas is trying to get at the heart of religious consecration. What exactly is religious consecration anyway? He gives a few explanations, but the last one is the most powerful:

Again, "a holocaust is the offering to God of all that one has," according to Gregory (Hom. xx in Ezech.). Now man has a threefold good, according to the Philosopher (Ethic. i, 8). First, the good of external things, which he wholly offers to God by the vow of voluntary poverty; secondly, the good of his own body, and this good he offers to God especially by the vow of continence, whereby he renounces the greatest bodily pleasures. The third is the good of the soul, which man wholly offers to God by the vow of obedience, whereby he offers God his own will by which he makes use of all the powers and habits of the soul. (*ST IIaIIae* Q. 186, a. 7)

What exactly is he saying here? Recall that in the Old Testament, during those times when the temple was open for worship, there were a variety of ways that one could make a gift of his possessions. If you've ever read through Leviticus, you've probably come across cereal offerings, wave offerings, incense offerings, peace offerings, sin offerings, guilt offerings, et cetera. Now, with all of these offerings, part of the host would be given to God (often the blood or the fat), part would be given to the priest(s), and (sometimes) part would be given to the one offering the sacrifice. But there is

one offering—the whole burnt offering or holocaust offering—that wasn't divided up. Rather, the host was consumed whole and entire on the altar of sacrifice. This was seen by the Jews as the greatest kind of offering. Why? Well, because it gets to the heart of what sacrifice is for. We receive our lives from God, and we offer them to God. We have nothing of our own. Rather, it's all a gift. And so we should live with the recognition and the gratitude that comes of receiving everything from the Lord, and this should translate into a spirit of sacrifice, of self-offering.

So, given that background, we can appreciate why St. Thomas describes religious life as a kind of whole burnt offering. By the vow of poverty, one offers his possessions. By the vow of chastity, one offers his body. By the vow of obedience, one offers his soul. Taken together, they offer the whole person.

In another place, in the same question, St. Thomas borrows again from St. Gregory the Great's *Homilies on Ezekiel*. There St. Gregory writes, "When a man vows to God all his possessions, all his life, all his knowledge, it is a holocaust." And why, one might ask, would anyone choose to do that? Well, because God is worthy. But here's the thing; that's not only true for religious. It's true for all mankind. So then how do we respond?

CONSECRATION AND BAPTISM

In the Christian tradition, it's common to speak of religious life as a kind of second baptism. Why? Was the first baptism not enough? That's not what's being said. The sense is that

religious consecration builds on baptismal consecration. Think about it this way: At baptism, one is understood to die with Christ. We descend with him into waters as a kind of entombment, and we rise glorious and victorious from the font to live a new and resurrected life. But that life is gained at the price of a death: “We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom 6:4). So, at baptism, we die to sin, and in religious consecration, one dies to the world.

But—and here’s the kicker—it’s not just religious who are called to live poverty, chastity, and obedience. All Christians, though not intended to live the counsels *in fact*, are called to live them *in spirit*. To understand what this means, we have to get at the second sense of consecration. To consecrate something means simply to make it holy. And, as we know, to be holy means to be set apart. So, consecration means set apart for holy use. You can see this with things used in the liturgy. We consecrate altars before celebrating Mass on them. After which point, it doesn’t make sense to use an altar for anything else. It is no longer an ordinary table. It has been set apart for holy use. So, too, we consecrate or bless chalices before using them to hold the Precious Blood. After which point, again, it doesn’t make sense to use a chalice for anything else.

Let’s bring it home here. We are consecrated at baptism, and in the process, we are set apart for holy use. By his baptismal character, a Christian is fashioned for the worship of God. That doesn’t mean a Christian has to spend every moment of every day in public or private acts of prayer and

worship, but it does mean that in every moment of every day, we can be present to God, given to God.

Like we said, all Christians are called to live the spirit of the counsels. We are called to a healthy detachment from material things. We are called to love generously and not selfishly. We are called to empty ourselves after the manner of Christ. By baptism, we have died to the world so as to live unto God. We have been consecrated, set apart for holy use, and we are marked by that purpose forever.

Okay, so if that's the case, isn't baptism sufficient? To make a Marian consecration seems like overkill, like making it out to be an eighth sacrament or making her the fourth member of the Holy Trinity. Here again, the parallel with religious life is illuminating. In response, we can say, yes, baptism is sufficient, but God is generous. He just keeps giving gifts. To some, he gives this grace of "following Christ more closely" after the manner of the apostles, of being "totally dedicated to God who is loved most of all" (CIC 573). So, too, Marian consecrations do not take anything away from baptismal consecration. Rather, they build on it.

But there is a difference we should highlight. Religious life is a consecration to Christ. Marian consecration, as the name suggests, is a consecration to Mary. It's quite a distance to go from a member of the Most Blessed Trinity to a creature. How does that make sense?

CONSECRATION AND CAUSALITY

Here, we can rely again upon the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas. We believe that God is at work in creation. He isn't

the God the deists imagine—laid up in his heavens, watching the world unfold from a distance. No, God is involved in our lives in even the minutest detail. St. Augustine famously wrote that God is more interior to us than we are to ourselves. So God looks upon us, imparts being to us at each moment, and works in and through us. That last piece can be a little bit scary. What do you mean when you say God works in and through me? Are we like puppets that God manipulates for some creepy and inexplicable reason? Nope. That's not what we're saying.

God makes us to be real causes, real agents in the world. He could, in theory, bring about all his plans directly without the help of his creatures, but he has chosen to act in and through us. Why? Well, for one, it manifests his power still more gloriously. Think about it, who is the better boss: the one who micromanages and does everything himself or the one who effectively delegates and animates his team? Exactly.

God's delegation doesn't mean he is removed from the scene. As we've said before, he remains intimately present even in the creature who is really acting. And here, we can appreciate a certain wisdom at work. God wants us to be like him. He wants to share his divine life with us, making us adopted sons and daughters. Now, he can do that by simply giving us grace; it reflects our great dignity even to be capable of receiving grace. But, for God, it seemed insufficient to leave it at that. Rather than restricting our place to that of passive recipients, he also makes us causes of change in the world and even causes of grace. He gives us a place within his providential plans, precisely to make us more like him who is the protagonist of the whole saving work.

So he entrusts parents with the creation of new life. He entrusts mere mortals with the governance of nations and the waging of wars. He entrusts priests with the conversion of bread and wine into his Body and Blood. It's really awesome to think about. This is the reason why it makes sense to pray in the first place. God knows what is good for us. He also knows what we want. So why would we ever bother praying? Well, because God has chosen to work through our prayers. He somehow binds up his gift of grace with our participation. He clarifies vocations through time spent in adoration. He purifies souls in purgatory through the offering of the Mass. He reconciles sinners to himself through the Anointing of the Sick and the Commendation of the Dying.

CONSECRATION AND THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

But, what is more, he also likes to bring about his will by empowering us to pursue holy designs with the help of others. The sacraments keep us constantly involved with the community of believers. We have to confess our sins to a priest. We are made to choose a sponsor at Confirmation. We come to knowledge of the Scriptures in study groups. This is part of the reason why we pray to the saints.

You can see where this is going. If it makes sense to be thrown in with Christians on earth, then why should death put an end to our ongoing communion? If fragile, imperfect Christians prove so helpful, why shouldn't glorious, perfect Christians be more helpful yet? So, in the Church's tradition, we are encouraged to venerate the saints for the miracle of grace that God has worked in them and also to invoke their intercession to obtain what is necessary for salvation.

During their lives, the saints merited graces which are stored up in the treasury of heaven. But grain gathered in a silo rots, so God makes those merits fruitful for the whole Church. In God's mysterious designs, the saints are permitted to act instrumentally in applying graces to those who call upon their names. In his wisdom, God wants to answer the prayers of his people through the mediation of his saints.

The saints themselves had a sense of this. On his deathbed, St. Dominic encouraged his brothers not to lament his loss, for he would be of more service to them after death than before. St. Thérèse longed to spend her heaven doing good on earth. And we can appreciate why God wills it so. God stirs up our desire for the life of sanctity and the life of heaven by having us appeal to those who already enjoy it. By a thousand invisible tethers, he anchors our hearts in heaven so that we can be drawn into the communion of saints that we have already begun to experience. This is just one more beautiful feature of the dispensation of his grace.

Now while we might appeal to our favorite saints or patron saints or saints especially suited for some purposes, there is a kind of hierarchy among the saints. Some receive objectively greater graces in their lives and so enjoy a special esteem in the Church's tradition. Think about St. Joseph. It's not for nothing that he was the foster father of the only begotten Son of God, the most chaste spouse of the Virgin, the Universal Protector of the Church, and the Terror of Demons. So, while all saints enjoy the vision of God and are filled to the brim with grace and are powerful intercessors in heaven, it's still true that not all saints are equal.

Another way of getting at this is to say that some saints are more powerful intercessors because they play a more significant part in the history of salvation. Within God's saving plans, there are certain privileged places, certain privileged roles. But at the center of history stands his choice to take human flesh and to be born of a woman. When the God-man entered our history, he could have struck like lightning. He could have appeared spontaneously. He could have done any number of other things. But he didn't. As we pray at Mass, "For us men and for our salvation, he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he was born of the Virgin Mary, and became man."

MARY THE MOLD

God's choice changes everything. The Lord chose Mary to be the Mother of God, the *Theotokos*, the God-bearer. As St. Augustine writes, "Him whom the heavens cannot contain, the womb of one woman bore. She ruled our Ruler. She carried him in whom we all are. She gave milk to our Bread." God's choice resounds through salvation history. It is not an isolated event. It is a blueprint of salvation. We who would be adopted sons and daughters of God must always and everywhere look to him who is the only-begotten Son of God and to the Mother who gave him birth.

In this spirit, St. Augustine writes about the Blessed Virgin Mary as the mold of God, since she formed the God-man in her womb. St. Louis de Montfort loved this image. He writes in his *True Devotion*, "Mary is the great mold of God, fashioned by the Holy Spirit to give human nature to

a Man who is God by the hypostatic union, and to fashion through grace men who are like to God. No godly feature is missing from this mold. Everyone who casts himself into it and allows himself to be molded will acquire every feature of Jesus Christ, true God, with little pain or effort, as befits his weak human condition.”

Using an image taken from sculpture, he extends the analogy to show that there is no better way to go about becoming like Christ than the way Christ himself chose. There are two methods, he recounts, to make a statue: with a hammer and chisel or with a mold. In the former course, it is difficult and susceptible to all kinds of mistakes. In the latter course, it is easy and assured. Mary has already formed Christ once, and she remains available to form us after the likeness of her Son. This captures the excellence and superiority of her mediation and intercession, which is but a share in the mediation and intercession in Christ.

So to be consecrated or entrusted to Mary is not strictly necessary. But it is good. And of all the saints to whom one could entrust himself, she is, by far, the greatest. She plays the greatest role in salvation history. She is given the greatest graces. God brings about his biggest plans in and through her. She is the Immaculate Conception. She is the Virgin Mother of God. She is Spouse of the Spirit. She is assumed into heaven where she reigns as Queen.

GOD, MARY, AND US

In what follows, we are going to take the approach of St. Thomas. We'll meditate on the mysteries of the Blessed

Virgin Mary as the grace at work in her overflows in our own lives. In St. Thomas's understanding, everything that Christ did and suffered is saving, and that includes what he does and suffers in and through the Virgin Mary. So, by contemplating her, we can hope not only for enlightenment and inspiration but also for salvation.

This book is tailor-made to help you to do just that. Each day will include a selection from St. Thomas's works that speaks to the grace of God at work in the Blessed Virgin Mary. The theological reflections help to heal our minds from the distraction and error that keep us from consecration and to free us to entrust ourselves to her.

Over the course of the next nine days, we will consider the Hail Mary in great detail. The Hail Mary, what St. Thomas called the Angelic Salutation, was a prayer that he himself treasured. It forms the subject for one of his most beautiful sermons, part of which we'll read together. And, in the end, we hope that the recitation of this prayer will fortify us in our identity as Christians.

But what is our identity as Christians, you might ask. If you ask any human being in heaven or on earth, "Who are you?" he'd probably respond—quite naturally—with his name: "I'm Matt." But if you followed up, you might access something deeper: "I didn't ask your name. I asked, 'Who are you?'" Perhaps a bit confused at this point, he might respond, "Well, I'm an Australian [If you're me (Matt) or one of my countrymen]." Now, a pattern emerges as your questioner follows up: "I didn't ask your nationality. Who are *you*?" At this point, what do you say? "My parents are Gary and Debbie. I'm a rugby fan. I like chocolate chip

cookies.” No. In the end, our deepest identity as Christians is to be a son or daughter of God. Every Christian in heaven and on earth should respond with one accord: “I am a child of God.”

Mary enjoys the most profound relationship with the Blessed Trinity of any Christian. She enjoys the life of grace to a degree unparalleled by any mere mortal. Throughout her life, she grew in grace at a bewildering rate. One author speaks of her as a kind of meteor. As she gets closer to the goal, closer to heaven, she just keeps picking up speed. At the time of her death or passing from this life, she was hurtling towards the heavenly Father.

In addition to being an adopted daughter of the Father in a preeminent way, she also has unique relationships with the other Persons of the Blessed Trinity. She is the Mother of the only begotten Son of God. She bore the God-man in her womb for nine months. She taught him to walk, to pray, and to love. He performs miracles at her bidding. He entrusts the Church to her in the end.

Finally, she is the Spouse of the Spirit. Her relationship with God is fruitful in a way unlike that of any other human being. The angel announces to her the plans of God, and she assents with a lively faith, quickening the Son in her Womb. The Spirit descended upon her in the New Creation as it once descended upon the waters at the dawn of time. She is the bride of the Bridegroom God. She is the Spirit’s dwelling place. When it comes to God, she is mother, spouse, and daughter. This is almost beyond belief.

What lies ahead is a journey with and through her to Jesus Christ. During the course of these days, you should pray

the Rosary devoutly, meditating upon her role in the divine mysteries. You should recite the Hail Mary with attention to the Angelic Salutation, the words of St. Elizabeth, and the response of the Church, each day asking for more and more lights and insights, for greater devotion and zeal, and for Marian virtues and a Marian heart.

Practically speaking, the consecration takes us nine days. You should plan to complete the consecration in successive days. Each day will have a theological reflection based on a passage from St. Thomas's writings and then a passage from St. Thomas himself. You can do it whenever you like, but there's a tradition of concluding on a Marian feast day, so plan to start eight days before a feast. The theological reflection and selected passage from Aquinas for each day should take you five to ten minutes. After each reading, you should follow on with a Rosary, continuing to ponder the mysteries described in the day's reading. That's really all there is to it: reading and Rosary.

On the ninth day, once you've prepared to make an act of entrustment, go before an especially significant statue of the Virgin Mary, or an icon of the *Theotokos*, or to a shrine or altar dedicated to her. Kneel before her whom you have come to know more fully and love more tenderly in the past days, and pray the prayer of entrustment. The act may not be accompanied by fireworks or consolations or organ accompaniment, but know that in that act of faith, the Lord delights to receive your prayer through his Mother, whose every request he has promised to answer.