



Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of January 6, 2012,
Epiphany of the Lord

Dear Friends,

CHRISt did not die alone. Two others died with Him. As MARY stood near her dying Son, so she stood near the two thieves in their agony. It was thanks to the contemplation of this reality that Venerable Mary Potter initiated the foundation of a religious congregation that would pray for and assist the dying, especially those who die abandoned or isolated in misery or sin.

Mary Potter was born on November 22, 1847 in Newington, in south London, the youngest of five children. Her father, who had not accepted his wife's conversion to Catholicism, abandoned the family one year after Mary's birth. They would never see him again. Mrs. Potter, affectionately called "Queen Victoria" by her family, found herself without resources, but thanks to charity from those near to her, she was able to provide the necessities. The youngest girl quickly became everyone's favorite. Much later, Mary would write, "What I most sorrow over in my past life was loving to be what I was—an idol in my home and circle—loving to be loved for my own sake and not for God's. From a child I wanted to be loved by others and to devote myself to them. When I grew up, the love of my brothers was not enough for me. I wanted to have someone entirely devoted to me."

Categorical advice

She found this person entirely devoted to her in the person of Godfrey King, to whom she became engaged in the middle of 1868. A very upright man, Godfrey encouraged Mary to take the care of her soul more seriously. His admonitions had such an effect that Mary felt God calling her to religious life. To be absolutely sure, she consulted Bishop Thomas Grant, the bishop of Southwark, who exhorted her in no uncertain terms to break off her engagement: "You are to have one Spouse, JESUS, whether you spend your life in the world or in the convent." This advice was difficult, but Mary followed it.

On December 8 of that year, she was received as a postulant into the Sisters of Mercy in Brighton. These religious, established in 1831, devoted themselves to serving the poor. On July 30, 1869, Mary received the habit and the name of Sister Mary Angela. A model novice, she was admired by all. However, her less than robust health was quickly ruined in this new environment, and she had to return into the world to regain her



Venerable Mary Potter

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strength. To her mother's great displeasure, Mary nevertheless did not abandon the idea of religious life, and continued, as well as she could, to practice what she had learned in the convent, in particular daily prayer. She was helped by a pious priest, Msgr. John Virtue. She read the *Treatise on True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*, by Saint Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort, which had just been translated into English. This work would have a major influence on her life. On December 8, 1872, Mary made her "consecration to JESUS through MARY" according to the formula recommended by Saint Louis-Marie. Noting that there was no commentary to the *Treatise on True Devotion* in English, she wrote the *Path of MARY*, the tone of which is summed up in the following passage: "Love that Heart, consecrate yourself to it... Let your sufferings, your actions, your words, your whole being renew again, on this earth, the life of MARY. To do this you must study MARY; to study her you must enter her Heart and observe its workings." Later on, Mary Potter would choose as a motto for the congregation she would found: "One in the Heart of MARY."

During her period of convalescence, Mary was deeply moved by the needs of the sick and the dying for assistance, and she developed a deep desire to devote herself to their eternal salvation. On November 6, 1874, in the depths of her heart there resounded the inspiration to found an order that would be primarily dedicated to aiding the dying.

Mary Potter's inspiration is of great importance for souls, because death is uniquely the moment that marks one's passage into eternity. "Death is the end of man's earthly pilgrimage, of the time of grace and mercy which God offers him so as to work out his earthly life in keeping with the divine plan, and to decide his ultimate destiny. When 'the single course of our earthly life' is completed we shall not return to other earthly lives: *It is appointed for men to die once* (Heb. 9:27). There is no 'reincarnation' after death. ... Each man receives his eternal retribution in his immortal soul at the very moment of his death, in a particular judgment that refers his life to Christ: either entrance into the blessedness of heaven—through a purification or immediately,—or immediate and everlasting damnation" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church, CCC*, nos. 1013, 1022).

Be prepared

The Church encourages us to prepare for death... to ask the Mother of God to intercede for us "at the hour of our death" (the "Hail MARY" prayer), and to entrust ourselves to Saint Joseph, the patron saint of a good death. "[I]n every deed and every thought, act as though you were to die this very day," recommends the book *The Imitation of Christ*. "If you had a good conscience you would not fear death very much. It is better to avoid sin than to fear death. If you are not prepared today, how will you be prepared tomorrow?" (1, 23, 1).

Death is a consequence of sin. Following Holy Scripture, the Church teaches that death entered the world as the result of man's sin (Rom. 5:12; 6:23). God intended for man not to die. However, death was transformed by Christ. JESUS, the Son of God, also suffered death, a part of the human condition. But in spite of His fear in the face of death, He took it on Himself in an act of complete and free submission to the will of His Father. JESUS' obedience transformed the curse of death into a blessing. Thanks to Christ, Christian death has a positive meaning. *For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain* (Phil. 1:21). *The saying is sure: If we have died with Him, we shall also live with Him* (II Tim. 2:11). Following Christ's example, the Christian can transform his own death into an act of obedience and love for the Father.

The Christian vision of death receives privileged expression in the liturgy of the Church: "Lord, for Your faithful people life is changed, not ended. When the body of our earthly dwelling lies in death we gain an everlasting dwelling place in heaven" (*Roman Missal*, Preface of Christian Death). The saints have also presented death in a positive light: "I want to see God and, in order to see Him, I must die" (Saint Teresa of Avila). "I am not dying; I am entering life" (Saint Therese of the Child JESUS) (cf. CCC nos. 1005-1014).

In another moment of interior grace, Mary Potter was brought to an intense devotion to the Most Precious Blood of JESUS, the instrument of our eternal salvation, and also to the Holy Spirit. Three elements thus united in her spirituality—to unite oneself with the Most

Blessed Virgin MARY to ask that the Most Precious Blood of JESUS be poured out on all the dying through the grace of the Holy Spirit. In February 1875, she wrote, "The Heart of MARY, the Precious Blood, the Holy Spirit—with such shalt thou fight and conquer!"

Mary Potter believed that Christian hope was the only true and deep solution to the anguish increasing in man from an ever-growing materialism. This hope rested on the Cross of Christ, which reveals the infinite value of every human life. For Mary, the souls to be most pitied were those who had no one to love them or to share their burden. Thus, not a single opportunity to do good to a soul must be lost. She would write, "The first command of the law is to love God above all things; but the second is like to it—to love your neighbour as yourself. Could you say you loved your neighbour as yourself if you saw him dying, alone, uncared for, and did not assist him? Could you see him cruelly slaughtered, without an attempt to save him? All over the world souls are dying, are perishing, falling into the bottomless abyss from which there is no redemption. Before it is too late, will you not raise one cry to heaven for mercy, ere the final sentence has been pronounced. ... It is not too late to save that soul, but it soon will be. Kneel and pray and entreat, and draw God's mercy."

An unbearable situation

God's call pressed Mary: "There is a sense of responsibility in it. Sinners are dying, souls made to the likeness of the Blessed Trinity are being lost. It seems as though they belong to me and I cannot bear that they should be taken from me. It would be a terrible and unbearable thing for me if I could not help them. But, by the help of God, I can." When she reported all her thoughts to Msgr. Virtue, he ordered her to renounce altogether the plan ripening in her mind, under pain of mortal sin. Several months of true anguish assaulted this sensitive soul, trapped between the certainty of having received a divine inspiration, and obedience to her spiritual father. The following year, Msgr. Virtue was sent to work elsewhere by his superiors, and Mary met a Marist priest, Father Edward Selley, who agreed to take her under his responsibility and help her establish the institute. She hoped to obtain her mother's blessing, but did not succeed in convincing her that this was the will of God.

One day in January 1877, she went to Brighton for the day with Margaret, her sister-in-law. When she was about to return home, she suddenly remembered the Gospel of the day, that of finding JESUS in the Temple, and she began to pray. A great peace enveloped her, and she decided to go to London instead of returning to her mother's in Portsmouth. When Mrs. Potter learned that her daughter was not returning, she became so angry that she refused to speak to her for a year and a half. From London, Mary went to Nottingham for a meeting with the bishop, Bishop Bagshawe, who welcomed her

and allowed the foundation of the new institute in his diocese, under the name "Little Company of MARY." The following July 2, Mary and five of her companions received the new community's habit—a black tunic and a blue veil. That is how they came to be known as the "Blue Sisters."

Mother Mary won souls through her sweetness. One Sunday evening, while the Sisters were at the back of the village chapel for the office of Compline followed by benediction of the Most Blessed Sacrament, a drunk came in during the sermon and began speaking loudly. The priest asked the guardian of the chapel to throw him out. Mother Mary intervened, speaking gently to this man, but the porter told her, "I'll take him home, Mother Mary." ... The drunk then cried, "Don't you dare lay a hand on me!" and pointing to Mother Mary, said, "I'll go with she." So Mother Mary accompanied this man to his home and returned in time for the benediction.

"My trust was not shaken"

However, Mother Mary was soon placed on the cross. Although full of goodwill, Bishop Bagshawe had very incomplete ideas about religious life. At the end of three weeks, finding the Mother too demanding, he deposed her and put another Sister in charge of the community. Mother Mary confided, "If this work had been a plan of my own, I should probably have said that I could not give the whole direction of it to another. As I do not believe it is a plan of my own but a work of Almighty God—one especially dear to Him and therefore specially crossed—I leave it to God, telling Him He must look to it. At the same time that I feel grieved when I see things going differently to what I hoped, my confidence in God is not shaken... Though He does not will everything that happens, He permits it and can, and does, draw good out of evil."

Several months later, the bishop appointed Mother Mary novice mistress, making it clear that she could neither receive any confidences from novices nor reproach them—she was only authorized to explain to them the meaning of their vocation. For Mother Mary, these conditions made performing her task impossible. "It seems to me," she wrote, "that the very way of overcoming oneself is to descend into particulars, not to look at things in a vague way or make resolutions in general, but rather to apply our resolution to particular instances and to have shown to us where we have failed." In a spirit of faith, however, she accepted this trial as a means of uniting herself with Christ's Passion. After a few weeks, though, Mother Mary made it known that her situation was impossible, and the bishop removed her from her position. He allowed her, however, to write her reflections on the spirit of the community; this text would be of inestimable value for posterity. In addition to these spiritual crosses, Mother Mary suffered from serious health

problems. In 1878, breast cancer forced her to undergo two operations in six months.

The Mother wrote, "You might have heard of the various crosses that have already beset this Little Society of MARY. But we must look at it in the light our Father Director puts it; he wrote to me months ago saying that he rejoiced at them, for he never yet had seen a work of God without them. The Will of God sweetens everything, so that when He wishes us to work we must wish it, when He desires us to suffer, when He calls us to speak to Him, we must answer gladly: 'Lord, we are here!'" However, at the beginning of 1879, the state of the community, owing above all to the superiors' lack of a religious mindset, forced Bishop Bagshawe to preside over a new election, which Mother Mary won.

Maternal love

Mary Potter gave the members of her institute the mission to care for Christ in all His members, especially the dying and the poorest; she wanted them to imitate "the maternal love of JESUS and MARY."—"God's love is Mother-love," the foundress asserted. If each human being reflects some part of the attributes of God, women have the particular gift of manifesting His maternal love, the Mother thought. Thus she desired that the Sisters be truly spiritual mothers. MARY'S maternity was their model—MARY is "one of us," she affirmed. She hoped that Our Lady might be proclaimed Mother of the Church. In a letter to Blessed Pope Pius IX, dated July 18, 1876, she placed these words in the mouth of MARY: "My child, God, Almighty though He be, after the possession of Himself, cannot give me anything more desirable, more precious, or dearer than souls. This JESUS knew; and at His death, wishing to leave me a measure of His Love, confided the Church in the person of St. John to my Maternal protection... Come then, to me, and bring to me the entire Church, which I have borne in my womb from the very time that I bore its Author, JESUS. May the Holy Vicar of my Son proclaim from His cross that I am the Mother of this Church. May he unite himself with his Master in saying to the nations of the earth, 'Behold your Mother,' and consecrate the Church, confided to him, to my Maternal Heart, and I will show myself a Mother." This desire would be realized a century later, on November 21, 1964, when Pope Paul VI proclaimed Our Lady "Mother of the Church," during the closing of the third session of the Second Vatican Council.

The Virgin MARY "cooperated by her obedience, faith, hope and burning charity in the work of the Savior in giving back supernatural life to souls. Wherefore she is our mother in the order of grace. ... The maternal duty of MARY toward men in no wise obscures or diminishes this unique mediation of Christ, but rather shows His power. For all the salvific influence of the Blessed Virgin on men ... flows forth from the superabundance of the merits of Christ, rests on His mediation, depends entirely on it

and draws all its power from it" (Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 60-62).

In October 1882, Mother Mary went to Rome with some Sisters to request Pope Leo XIII's approval of her institute. To their great joy, they were invited to attend the Pope's Mass, then to a private audience during which the Holy Father invited them to stay in Rome to found a house there. The foundress accepted this offer and soon set in motion the construction of a hospital close to the Lateran; it would be completed in 1908. The Little Company's constitutions were then drawn up; they would be approved by the Holy See on May 31, 1886. "It's not my work, the Mother would humbly acknowledge. "It's God's work. Anyone who calls the Little Company of MARY my work is lowering it."

Starting in 1885, the foundations would grow in number, first in Australia, on the invitation of the archbishop of Sydney, then in Italy and Ireland. Although the essential work of the Little Company was to be close to those who were ending their lives on earth, the foundress did not exclude any apostolate *a priori*. Among its works, the institute has included care for newborns. Mother Mary hoped that, in imitation of the Most Blessed Virgin MARY in the mystery of her Visitation to her cousin Elizabeth, the members of her institute might lend a helping hand to poor mothers to help them during childbirth and in the following weeks. But to help young mothers was a novelty in relation to nuns' traditional activities. Cardinal Manning, the archbishop of

Westminster, felt it necessary to prohibit it, as inappropriate for consecrated women. However, on the Mother's appeal, in 1886 the Holy See granted the institute at first limited permission to perform itself to this service, which it expanded in 1905.

"She loved God"

In the spring of 1913, the news spread in Rome that "la santa Madre" was gravely ill. Many visitors came to her bedside. On April 4, Cardinal Merry del Val, the secretary of state, sent Mother Mary a special blessing from Pope Saint Pius X. She had often declared that the day she could no longer receive Communion would be her last. On April 9, during the celebration of the Holy Mass in her room, at the moment of consecration, she stretched out her arms as she repeated the holy Name of JESUS. After losing consciousness, she peacefully rendered her soul to God as the Mass ended. Learning of her death, a priest who had known her well declared, "Mother did only one thing. She loved God."

At the time of the foundress' death, the Little Company numbered sixteen houses spread across Europe, North America, Australia, and Africa. Today, the Sisters continue their work on the five continents, serving the dying and all those who suffer. In 1988, Pope John Paul II declared Mary Potter venerable. First buried in Rome, her mortal remains were transferred to the Nottingham Cathedral in 1997.

In a reflection on the development of her institute, Mother Mary Potter wrote, "How good God has been to us! If we could only thank Him! The everlasting ages alone will help us to thank our good God. Looking back at the life He led us through, what do we find we are grateful for? That we had grace given us to walk, with JESUS, the way of the Cross, that we suffered a little and were despised, humiliated. For this grace we are indebted to Our Lord, for we could not of ourselves. No, we shall not glory at the hour of death in convents built, in hospitals, but shall say with the Apostle: *God forbid that I should glory save in the Cross of my Lord JESUS CHRIST* (Gal 6:14)."

Let us ask Venerable Mary Potter to obtain for us the grace of following JESUS to Calvary, so that we might attain Heaven. May she encourage us to assist the dying and inspire us with words and actions to help them go peacefully to God!

Dom Antoine Marie
—
o.s.b.

- *Mary Potter*, by Sr Elizabeth Leroy LCM, Catholic Truth Society, 2010.

- *Mother Mary Potter*, by Patrick Dougherty, Sands and Co Ltd, 1961.

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