



*Devotion to the Immaculate and Sorrowful Heart of Mary
according to Father Masmítja,
founder of the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary*

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The Immaculate Heart of Mary and the Apostolic Spirit

“[Jesus] appointed twelve [whom he also named apostles] that they might be with him and he might send them forth to preach” (Mk 3:14). Their vocation had a two-fold structure: first, “that they might be with [Jesus]”; second, “[that] he might send them forth to preach”. Notice that being precedes doing. First, the apostles had to spend time with Jesus, learn from Him, and be formed by Him; only then could they go out and bear witness to Him, preach, and bring others to conversion. Jesus Himself clarified this reality with an image: “I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit; [...] apart from me, you can do nothing” (Jn 15:5).

Mary followed this same pattern. Consider the Annunciation and the Visitation. She loved God and prayed, and from that foundational relationship she could love and serve her neighbor. In Christian history Mary has helped convert many sinners when people invoked her Immaculate Heart. For this reason, Father Joaquin Masmítja founded a congregation of Sisters under the patronage of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. For Fr. Masmítja, “The devotion to the heart of Mary was [...], above all, the expression of an apostolic spirit and a means of apostolate.” This evening we will consider the apostolic dimension of the IHM Sisters’ charism. The Sisters’ apostolic work finds its source and fruitfulness in God after the pattern of Mary’s Immaculate Heart.





Following the example of Our Lady, the IHM religious community is contemplative-active. Our Constitutions read: “The Institute is committed to a life of service to the Church: the contemplation of the Word and the spread of his message of salvation through the various works of education” (n. 5). Notice the order: contemplation, then education; being precedes doing.

Fr. Masmitjá described the contemplative and apostolic components of his new congregation in the Forward to the 1852 IHM Constitutions. He wrote, “[God] has willed that fervent souls, free from worldly attachments, should devote themselves to serve God in holy prayer and secret penance in the silence of the cloister, and become a bulwark for youth and for society as a whole” (48). This is the contemplative, “behind-the-scenes” part: the hidden aspect of prayer and sacrifice. Next, Fr. Masmitjá described the active apostolate: The community should “[instruct] girls in the principles and meritorious practices of our holy religion and of sound morality and in the works befitting their sex. [...] It sees in giving a solid education to girls an apt means of introducing and spreading, among all classes of society, true devotion to God and a holy fear of Him, so that others may not fall into sin” (48, 50). This is the perceptible part of our charism—teaching and formation in the school setting.

How does the Immaculate Heart of Mary help the Sisters live this charism? We will consider a few points from Fr. Masmitjá’s description: freedom from attachment, prayer and penance, being a bulwark for youth and society, and teaching faith and morality.

Fr. Masmitjá wanted his Sisters to be “free from worldly attachments”. Why is this important? Consider Our Lady. Mary is free of Original Sin and all unhealthy attachments. Her heart is immaculate, which literally means “without stain”. She sees clearly as God sees, and she wills what God wills—that is, our freedom and fulfillment in Him! Mary intercedes powerfully for the conversion of sinners, that her fellow human creatures may know the peace of freedom from sin and the joy of communion with God.



Of all human creatures, Mary is most fully and truly free. St. Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, “Now that you are freed from sin and have become slaves of God, your benefit is sanctification as you tend toward eternal life” (Rom 6:22). Our ongoing conversion sanctifies us; it frees us more and more to love with a heart like Mary’s, to love God and neighbor with a fuller intensity. The less self-interested our love is, the more efficacious our prayers, sacrifices, and apostolic works will be.

The IHM Constitutions also describe the benefit of freedom from sin and from worldly attachments: “The Sisters seek to imitate Christ more closely so that they may derive more abundant fruition of their baptismal grace and be freed from the hindrances which deter them from wholehearted worship of God. They follow Christ by contemplating God, proclaiming the kingdom, and striving to draw sinners back to Him” (n. 10). Notice the order again: first the Sisters contemplate God; after that we proclaim the kingdom and help people become free of sin.

Fr. Masmitjá wanted his Sisters to “devote themselves to holy prayer and secret penance in the silence of the cloister.” Jesus knows the value of hiddenness! He came into this world so inconspicuously at the Annunciation and at his nativity; he grew up in a poor family and an obscure village; during his ministry he spoke about the value of hidden prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, and he presented parables about the hidden growth of the Kingdom of God; for two millenia He has hidden his glory in the Blessed Sacrament.

St. Thérèse imitated the hiddenness of Jesus in something she called “The Little Way”—that is, her humble and inconspicuous approach to discipleship and holiness in the ordinary circumstances of life. Surely Mary lived the Little Way perfectly, long before St. Thérèse discovered it and articulated it!

The Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary learn from Our Lady how to take what the Lord sets before us and turn every moment into a sacrificial offering to Him. Consider Jesus’ infancy;



think of the prayers, works, joys, and sufferings Mary offered in those moments. Recall the Annunciation... the Visitation... the birth of Jesus... his presentation in the temple... the prophecy of Simeon... the flight into Egypt... the loss of Jesus for three days... and his finding in the temple. St. Luke wrote twice in the infancy narratives that Mary pondered in her heart the events of Jesus' life. She teaches us to do the same, especially through the rosary.

In turn, the Sisters teach their students to pray. As the adage goes, "You cannot give what you do not have." St. Bernard captured this idea in an image; he said, "If you are wise, you will be reservoirs and not channels." Dom Chautard used this image in his spiritual classic The Soul of the Apostolate. He explained: "The channels let the water flow away, and do not retain a drop. But the reservoir is first filled, and then, without emptying itself, pours out its overflow, which is ever renewed, over the fields which it waters. How many there are devoted to words, who are never anything but channels, and retain nothing for themselves, but remain dry while trying to pass on life-giving grace to souls!" (Chautard, 52-53). It is of paramount importance that the Sisters be women of prayer. In the words of Jesus, "From the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks" (cf. Lk 6:45).

The Sisters can also live the call to hidden prayer and secret penance in less obvious ways—for example, through those prayers, works, and sacrifices offered by Sisters who are not currently teaching in a classroom. The IHM Constitutions state: "The Sisters engage in the works of Catholic education, including spiritual retreats, serving the people of God at every level and in any program which provides an opportunity to spread the Gospel message entrusted to the Church. Likewise, the Sisters engaged in the domestic works of the Institute contribute essentially to this apostolate of service" (n. 67). And again: "When old age or illness results in a Sister's full or partial retirement from apostolic activity, she continues to contribute to the work of the Institute, as far as she is able, especially by the apostolate of prayer and suffering in union with Christ and Mary so as to fill up what is lacking in Christ's sufferings



for the good of his Body the Church” (n. 73). Dom Chautard asserted that “All true apostolic workers expect much more from their sacrifices and prayers than from their active work” (Chautard, 111).

Fr. Masmitjá envisioned that the Sisters would become “a bulwark for youth and for society as a whole”. What exactly is a “bulwark”? (I consulted Mr. Webster.) The dictionary contains descriptive military imagery in its definition of “bulwark”: it is “a defense wall capable of resisting a cannon shot.” A synonym for bulwark is “rampart”—which, by the way, the Bible uses to describe the Lord. A “rampart” is “an embankment encircling a castle, defending it from attackers.” What vivid imagery for the reality of spiritual warfare! The Immaculate Heart of Mary is a bulwark for us; the devil stands absolutely no chance against Mary. In union with Mary, who is full of grace, the Sisters too are called to become a bulwark. Through ongoing conversion our hearts will grow in the likeness of Mary’s sinless Heart; then our prayers, sacrifices, and apostolic works will be more efficacious on behalf of youth and society.

One time a seminarian thanked our Sisters for their prayers and said, “The priests are on the front lines, and you Sisters are the artillery.” On that note, here’s a fun fact: In medieval times, soldiers wore their swords on the left side of their belts in order to draw them at a moment’s notice with their right hands; that custom is why our Sisters wear the dolor rosary on the left side—really! Prayer is our spiritual weapon, and it exercises real power in spiritual battle. The IHM Directory states: “Above all, the Founder instructed the Sisters to attack the roots of sin by praying for the conversion of sinners and by working for the evangelization of society” (n. 51).

Penance is another certain means of winning grace for souls. In *The Soul of the Apostolate* Dom Chautard wrote, “The world is so firmly entrenched in the spirit of pleasure that ordinary arguments, and even the most brilliant analyses and intuitions, will be incapable of destroying its citadel. What is needed is for some minister of God to make the Passion [of Christ] a vivid, living reality by his



own mortification and detachment” (Chautard, 139-140). Here again, the theme repeats: being precedes doing. The quality of the hidden inner life directly affects the fruitfulness of exterior works.

The IHM Constitutions reflect the order of being before doing. They state: “The Sisters affirm the primacy of their consecrated lives as daughters of the Church and offer themselves to serve the Church in its mission of transmitting Christ’s message of salvation” (n. 66). Let us now consider the visible “doing” part of the IHM charism.

The active work of a religious order is called the “apostolate” after the word “apostle”; “apostle” means “one who is sent”. The apostolate is all about going out to others and giving of oneself. God Himself is our model: the Father sent the Son; the Father and Son sent the Holy Spirit; the Son sent twelve of his disciples, making them apostles. After his resurrection Jesus said, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you. [...] Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained” (cf. Jn 20:21-23). “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age” (Mt 28:19-20).

Jesus entrusted an apostolate to Mary as well: spiritual motherhood. Her mission is more subtle but no less important than that of the apostles. From the cross Jesus gave Mary this mission: “... Jesus saw standing there by the cross his mother and the disciple whom he loved; he said to his mother, ‘Woman, behold your son’ “ (Jn 19:26). By extension Jesus sent her to be mother of the Church, the members of the Body of Christ. Mary fulfilled her role as spiritual mother by praying with the early Church which awaited the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. She has served as spiritual mother to countless Christians down the centuries.

Fr. Masmitjá described the apostolic service of the Sisters, which reflects the purpose of the Heart of Mary. He directed the community to “[instruct] girls in [...] our holy religion [...] and true



devotion to God.” How would the Sisters cultivate true and lasting devotion to God? Dom Chautard offered some advice in *The Soul of the Apostolate*. He noted that many Catholic clubs in Paris frequently featured bands, theatricals, lantern-lectures, and movies, but he recommended a different approach. He wrote, “Do not merely have, as your ideal, to give the youth a selection of clean amusements that will turn them aside from illicit pleasures and dangerous associations, nor simply to give them a Christian varnish, through routine attendance at Mass, or the reception of the Sacraments at long intervals and with questionable dispositions. Launch out into the deep” (Chautard, 54-58).

St. John Paul the Great frequently used the same phrase from the Gospel: “Put out into the deep,” recalling Jesus’ directive to Simon Peter the fisherman. St. John Paul recognized that the youth have a characteristic energy and enthusiasm to do something great with their lives. In his many celebrations of World Youth Day he never hesitated to invite and challenge young people to “Open wide the doors to Christ!” and to “Be not afraid!” All people, including the youth, are called to holiness and are capable of authentic and vibrant Christian discipleship.

The IHM Constitutions outline the Sisters’ method of preparation to become good catechists. They state: “As the whole of Christ’s life was a continual teaching, so must the whole life of each Sister bear witness to Him. Only in deep communion with Christ the Teacher will she find the light and strength for the continuous renewal of her own life and of her transmission of the Good News of salvation given to the Church by the Son of God [...]” (n. 64). And again: “It is thus the Sisters’ mission to teach: to be a voice for the Church in spreading the true message of Christ which finds its unity in the trinity of Sacred Tradition, Sacred Scripture, and the Magisterium. To be faithful to this duty, the Sisters devote their lives to the study of the Church’s teaching, always pondering the mysteries of Faith in the light of prayer” (n. 69).



The Sisters strive to form the youth by sharing their own practices of prayer. The IHM Directory states: “The Sisters daily seek in the Eucharist, in other prayers and penances, and in devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary a joyful fidelity to the Lord which will inspire and enliven their apostolic teaching; and they seek by the same means to direct their students to strive for holiness” (n. 53).

Fr. Masmitjá further described the apostolic work of the Sisters, calling upon the community to “[instruct] girls in [...] sound morality and [...] a holy fear of [God], so that others may not fall into sin.” Under the guidance of our Lady, the Sisters would aim to encourage conversion of life and prevent further sin. They would do this for the glory of God, for the salvation of souls, and to spare Mary’s Heart from an eighth sword of sorrow.

Scripture speaks of this “holy fear of God” in the Old Testament: “The fear of the Lord is the first stage of wisdom; prudent are all who live by it” (Ps 111:10ab). The fear of the Lord is not a servile fear, which is the disposition of a servant or slave who dreads his master’s punishment. Rather, the fear of the Lord is a filial fear; this is the disposition of a son who does not want to displease his father who loves him. The prophet Isaiah lists “fear of the Lord” as a gift of the Holy Spirit; certainly, this healthy and holy fear of the Lord animated the Heart of Mary, who desired to please God in all things. The Sisters encourage their students in this “holy fear of God” so that they will approach Christian faith and morality in the context of a relationship with God, not as just another subject in school.

Fr. Masmitjá hoped that the Sisters’ influence would have lasting effects in the lives of the students and, through them, in society. This would require the Sisters’ own ongoing conversion, prayer, and penance. In *The Soul of the Apostolate* Dom Chautard observed that “The one thing most likely to induce the faithful to lead a really Christian life is precisely the virtue of the one charged with teaching it. [...] Only an apostle who is disinterested, humble, and chaste can lead souls on into the battle against the ever-growing forces of greed, ambition, and impurity. Only an apostle who has learned the science of the



Crucifix will be able to check that everlasting search for comfort and ease, that worship of pleasure that threatens to sweep the whole world and undermine families and whole nations to their eventual destruction” (Chautard, 115, 142).

To encourage conversion and prevent sin, the IHM Sisters pray, sacrifice, and teach others the timeless mysteries of our Faith. Centuries ago, St. Paul exhorted Christians to rid themselves of sinful habits and instead to value the true, the good, and the beautiful. He wrote to the Philippians, “Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing what you have learned and received and heard and seen in me. Then the God of peace will be with you” (Phil 4:8-9). St. Paul suggested what they should think about, then what they should do. The Sisters guide their students to think—to ponder in their hearts like Mary—and then to act upon what they have pondered. The Sisters and students can be formed by the Lord in liturgical and personal prayer, and then go in peace, glorifying the Lord by their lives.

Our Constitutions read: “From the very beginning Fr. Masmitjá exhorted the Sisters to serve the Church by prayer and teaching as the most efficacious means to attain the lofty aims of the congregation. Thus the Sisters would instruct others, especially young women, in the Catholic Faith so that they in turn might become the instruments for instructing and strengthening others, and in this fashion rebuild the foundations of morality in a society weakened by its divorce from religion” (n. 65).

In 1848 when the IHM community was founded in Spain, boys and girls attended separate schools. Fr. Masmitjá hoped to help rebuild society through the family: through education his Sisters would instill the faith in young women, many of whom would eventually become mothers. The Immaculate Heart of Mary would be the model for the Sisters and for the girls in their charge. Every woman, whatever her vocation, is called to virtue and holiness after the pattern of Mary’s Heart.

In his encyclical *Mulieris Dignitatem*, “On the Dignity of Women”, St. John Paul referred



to Genesis when God said, “I will make a suitable partner [helper] for the man” (Gen 2:18-25). He reflected that the man and woman must help one another, “first of all by the very fact of their being human persons” (MD 7). Both the man and the woman should call forth in each other nobility and virtue. St. Paul urged the Christians not to drag each other down to what is base and self-serving, but rather to build up one another and support one another in goodness.

Leaders in the early Church encouraged women to practice Marian virtue without always saying so explicitly. For example, St. Peter counseled in his first letter, “You married women must obey your husbands, so that any of them who do not believe in the word of the Gospel may be won over apart from preaching, through their wives’ conduct. They have only to observe the reverent purity of your way of life. The affectation of an elaborate hair dress, the wearing of golden jewelry, or the donning of rich robes is not for you. Your adornment is rather the hidden character of the heart, expressed in the unfading beauty of a calm and gentle disposition. This is precious in God’s eyes” (1 Pt 3:1-4). St. Cyprian addressed virgins consecrated to God in this way: “You began your way of life courageously; now persevere without faltering. Seek right conduct as your adornment, not jewelry or attractive clothing. [...] You have already begun to be now what we shall all be in the future. You already possess, here in this world, the glory of the resurrection” (LH, Common of Virgins).

Following Fr. Masmitja’s description of their charism, the Sisters today invite students to develop a devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Ideally this will help them be faithful disciples and do (act) accordingly. This year our diocesan stewardship poster reads: “Fully Alive as Missionary Disciples”. Let us ask Mary to teach us how to ponder the life and words of Jesus in our hearts as she did. In her company may be with Jesus and do whatever He tells us, on whatever mission He may send us.