

**Our Lady of the Sacred Heart**  
**MOTHER – DISCIPLE OF THE SACRED HEART OF JESUS**  
**Our Mother and our Guide**  
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**I. INTRODUCTION**

This year, from May 2008 - May 2009, we in the Philippines, are already celebrating the Year of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart. I know we are a bit too early but then again, what's wrong with celebrating in advance. The year is in remembrance of the very first time Fr. Chevalier pronounced the title Our Lady of the Sacred Heart almost 150 years ago - the famous conversation "under the four lime trees." Most of us would know the story but let us together recall what happened by hearing from one of the early MSCs, Fr. Charles Piperon:

So, during the year 1859 (it is not possible to fix either the month or the day that this conversation took place...As far as we can rely on the memoirs written later, it must have been towards the end of May or the beginning of June), we used to spend our afternoon sitting in the shade of the lime trees, since the sun was very hot. On one occasion, there were several confreres present, either from our own or from neighboring parishes....Then suddenly, Rev. Father Chevalier, who seemed pre-occupied with an idea asked us: "What title will we give to Our Lady's Chapel in our church?" Each of us replied according to his attraction and his own devotion. One said the Immaculate Heart of Mary, or Our Lady of Victories, another Our Lady, Mother of Mercy, another Our Lady of the Rosary." "No, no," said Rev. Father, "we will have Our Lady of the Sacred Heart." This beloved title was thus pronounced for the first time and it was heard with surprise.<sup>1[1]</sup>

Today, almost 150 years after that conversation, we gather from different countries all over the world as lay members of the religious family that Fr. Chevalier founded, members of the worldwide Chevalier Family, a family entrusted to the special care of Mary under the title Our Lady of the Sacred Heart. We gather in this beautiful country to pray together, to learn together, to recreate together, to share with each other and experience concretely what it means to be "family."

Today's theme is Mary, our mother and guide. And to us, members of the Chevalier family, Mary is of course, Our Lady of the Sacred Heart. I presume, each person in this gathering is already very familiar with Our Lady of the Sacred Heart. Let us have a little quiz. How many images of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart do we have? Three! The first image is of course Chevalier's original image (show picture 1), "the Immaculate Virgin, normal size, hands and eyes directed downwards towards the child Jesus standing in front of her. On his breast, the child will have his little heart surrounded by rays and with his finger he points it out to the faithful"<sup>2[2]</sup> and His other hand pointing to his mother behind him. The second image is the most popular one, at least back home (show picture 2). We see Our Lady, carrying the child Jesus in her arms. Jesus points to his heart with one hand and to his mother with the other hand. Mary points to Jesus' heart as well. The third image is of course the biblical image which is the image

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<sup>1[1]</sup>Jan G. Bovenmars, MSC, *Our Lady of the Sacred Heart*, General House, Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, Rome, 1996, 7-8

<sup>2[2]</sup>Ibid, 1

of Mary at the foot of the cross (show picture 3). As we very well know, the title and the images all proclaim one meaning. This meaning is what we will talk about today.

## II. WHO IS OUR LADY OF THE SACRED HEART

Let me share to you an interpretation of the second image of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart from someone who is not a member of the Chevalier family. I believe this is important because I think it tells us what the image of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart says to people.<sup>3[3]</sup> “The Virgin of the Sacred Heart is a good illustration of Mary’s role in the Church – which is to bring us to Christ and to carry Him to us. In this effigy, the focus is not on Mary herself but on the child she carries, the child who beckons us to his open heart. This Marian cult is actually a devotion to Christ, a contemplation of his love, and more specifically, an adoration of his Sacred Heart.”<sup>4[4]</sup> How interesting that the image speaks so well of itself! Has it always been intended this way? In August 1884, Fr. Chevalier writes: “Knowing that all is done through Mary, we decided to associate her in the diffusion of the knowledge of the heart of her divine Son. But we needed a new title which would indicate her cooperation in this work of regeneration and it was then that we had the idea of calling her Our Lady of the Sacred Heart.”<sup>5[5]</sup> So, from the very beginning, devotion to Our Lady of the Sacred Heart has been a devotion propagated in support of and in the service of devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Although this talk is not on the Sacred Heart of Jesus, let me just say that I believe that devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus is a devotion to the love of God. This love is a love that associates with the lowly ones. It is a love that works for justice, a love that draws one to itself and thus pushes one to action. Aloysius Pieris expresses it beautifully when he says, “devotion to the Sacred Heart is not romantic heart gazing, but a programmatic faith leading to a shared commitment to brave deeds of love on behalf of his least brothers and sisters.”<sup>6[6]</sup> It is this understanding of the Sacred Heart and devotion to it that, for me, is, and should be, the foundation of our understanding and living out of the devotion to Our Lady of the Sacred Heart.

Knowing this, allow me now to proceed and ask the following questions: what do these devotions, specifically the devotion to Our Lady of the Sacred Heart mean for us, members of the Chevalier family, today? What are the concrete implications of “owning” this devotion so that our “devotion” is not limited to pious practices but is something that is seen in our way of living and loving, in our way of being in the world today? What are the challenges of today’s world and what answers does the devotion propose? How do we live out these answers?

## III. OUR LADY OF THE SACRED HEART ACCORDING TO FR. CHEVALIER

The title “Our Lady of the Sacred Heart” was born out of Fr. Chevalier’s prayerful reflection on scripture and so it is to him that one traces the origin of the devotion. The title brings together two major devotions in the church during Fr. Chevalier’s time: (1) devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and (2) devotion to Mary, the mother of Jesus. Note that in the mind of Fr. Chevalier, it was not a lifeless combination of two devotions, rather, it was a dynamic

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<sup>3[3]</sup> Nick Joaquin, ed., *Mary in the Philippines*, (Luz Mendoza Santos, Manila, Philippines, May 1982)

<sup>4[4]</sup> *ibid*, 60

<sup>5[5]</sup> Jules Chevalier, “Letter Regarding the First Edition” dated 24 August 1884 in *Our Lady of the Sacred Heart*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, Sheila Larkins, FDNSC, translator, (Canberra Publishing and Printing: Australia, 1985), 211.

<sup>6[6]</sup> Aloysius Pieris, SJ, “The Heart of Jesus’ Spirituality and the Prophetic Mission to the Poor: A Scriptural Meditation” in *East Asian Pastoral Review*, Vol. 41, #1, (East Asian Pastoral Institute, QC Phils., 2004), 34

bringing together such that a new devotion was born having as its object the bond of love between Jesus and Mary.<sup>7[7]</sup> In this relationship, Jesus, in particular the Sacred Heart, is the source of all graces. Mary, Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, is the “intercessor-dispenser” bringing people’s needs to Jesus and then dispenses the graces of Jesus’ heart to people. Fr. Chevalier liked using the image of a “treasurer.” The Heart of Jesus is like a “purse” which contains the graces and the blessings. Mary then is like a “treasurer” who holds the purse and dispenses the blessings from that purse.

Fr. Chevalier was a man of his time, using language of his generation. Like his contemporaries, he was guilty of certain exaggerations especially with regards the role of Mary. In spite of the exaggerations, Fr. Chevalier was very clear about the sole mediatorship of Jesus and the primacy of Jesus and His Sacred Heart over Mary. This is precisely the point of the title, Our Lady is never presented without the Sacred Heart. The Sacred Heart is primary, it is the instrument and symbol of the love of God and it is from the Heart of Jesus that the Immaculate Conception has sprung.<sup>8[8]</sup>

Today, the “spirituality of the heart”, as I understand it, demands active participation in the building of God’s kingdom here and now, a world where justice and compassion reign. As Pieris puts it, the most eloquent symbol of love is ACTION, particularly action for justice. In the light of this, I am convinced that we need to revisit our own understanding of and our language about Our Lady of the Sacred Heart. I believe that seeing Our Lady of the Sacred Heart primarily as intercessor and dispenser of graces may not push us to action. What do I mean?

Today, we have brought upon ourselves a global ecological crisis of unbelievable proportions. In the Philippines, it is still raining at this time when the rainy season should have ended already last month. How many natural disasters have the world experienced only within this year? The “Inconvenient truth” is we seem to have “disturbed” the eco-system so much that mother earth seem to be shaking itself so violently if only to get rid of these little destructive creatures on it’s skin. Then, we need to even add to the picture the financial crisis rocking the world at the moment and poverty everywhere.

What am I called to do in these situations? - I, a member of the Chevalier family, one who claims to have a devotion to Our Lady of the Sacred Heart? If Our Lady is for me, primarily an intercessor and dispenser of graces, I ask for her intercession, of course! I see what is happening before me and so I pray to Mary and ask her to intercede for the world, for the particular situations of pain, suffering, and injustice that I see. With that, I have done my part. And now, what is left for me to do is to wait, in faith, for Our Lady to dispense the graces we need. The burden is on Our Lady, the burden is not on me. To relate to her primarily as intercessor and dispenser of graces puts me in a passive position and therefore does not push me to action. I am convinced that this is not enough. In fact, I do not think Fr. Chevalier would agree with such a response. I think we cannot just wait for Mary to dispense the graces of Jesus’ Sacred Heart. I think we should not be satisfied with just asking for her intercession. Our spirituality, the Spirituality of the Heart, demands more from us.

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<sup>7[7]</sup>“The very special love that the Sacred Heart has for Mary and the very special love the Blessed Virgin Mary has for the Sacred Heart of Her Divine Son.” F.D. Mullane, MSC, *Devotion to Our Lady of the Sacred Heart*, (Salesian Technical School, Tokyo, Japan, 1961) 5

<sup>8[8]</sup>Jules Chevalier, *Our Lady of the Sacred Heart*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, Sheila Larkins, FDNSC, translator, (Canberra Publishing and Printing: Australia, 1985) 56

If this is not enough, how then should we understand the title and the devotion to Our Lady of the Sacred Heart today? What should we give emphasis to so that our devotion promotes active participation in the building of God's kingdom of justice and compassion? At this point, allow me to search for an answer to these questions by looking at Mary in her historical context as well as investigating a few texts from the New Testament that have reference to her.

#### IV. MIRIAM OF NAZARETH: THE MARY OF HISTORY<sup>9[9]</sup>

Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, historically, was a Jewish girl from Nazareth in Galilee. Her name was Miriam, a most typical name for Jewish women because it was the name of the prophetess, the sister of Moses and Aaron. She lived a Jewish life, celebrating and keeping Shabbat, attending synagogue or the local village assembly, and with her family going to Jerusalem for the annual Jewish feasts. We do not really know how she looked like but most probably, she had semitic features. This means Mediterranean dark hair (not blonde), dark eyes (not blue) and dark skin (not white). Miriam "in fact is one of our race, a true daughter of Eve...and truly our sister, who as a poor and humble woman fully shared our lot."<sup>10[10]</sup>

Miriam was a poor woman from Nazareth, a small farming village in Galilee. First century Nazareth is described by scholars as "a small Jewish village without any political significance, pre-occupied with agriculture, and no doubt, taxation."<sup>11[11]</sup> There was no sign of material wealth of any kind, "no paved streets, no public buildings, no public inscriptions, no marble or mosaics, or frescoes."<sup>12[12]</sup> Being married to a *tekton*, a woodworker, she and her household belonged to the artisan class, a sub-group within the lower economic class during their time. In agrarian societies, there were basically two classes, upper and lower, with an enormous gap between them. In the lower class were the peasants, the artisans, the unclean and degraded and the expendable ones.<sup>13[13]</sup> Miriam, compared to her neighbors, was not any poorer. But just beside their village was a rich Roman city, Sepphoris, a stark reminder to the villagers of their poverty. Aside from being economically poor, they, with the rest of the Galileans, were also politically marginalized. Palestine, during the first century was under the Roman Empire and its citizens bore the burden of heavy taxation. They had to pay taxes to the Roman Emperor, to the Jewish client king, and to the Temple. "Taxes levied on subject peoples were especially severe."<sup>14[14]</sup>

The Israelite society was family oriented. Selection of a spouse was a family affair and not for the individual alone to decide. At twelve and a half years old, the young Jewish girl normally married and the control over her is passed from her father to her husband. A two-step

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<sup>9[9]</sup>Information in this section is mostly taken from Part 4 of Elizabeth Johnson's book *Truly Our Sister*. Part 4 is entitled "Picturing a World." Mary Thomas, in her book review describes this section as "a fine scholarly summary of the best of contemporary research."

Elizabeth Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints*, (Continuum, New York, 2003), 137-207

<sup>10[10]</sup>Pope Paul VI, *Marialis Cultus*, par. 56

<sup>11[11]</sup>E. Johnson, 144 (A quotation from Jonathan Reed).

<sup>12[12]</sup>Ibid 143

<sup>13[13]</sup> Based on the model of traditional agrarian society developed by anthropologist Gerhard Lenski. Discussed on pages 144-146 of Johnson's book.

<sup>14[14]</sup>Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation*. Rev. ed., (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1999) 27

marriage process is then followed.<sup>15[15]</sup> The first step is the betrothal which is the formal exchange of consent between the husband and the girl in front of witnesses. At this point, they enter into a legal marriage contract. This stage usually takes one year. During such time, the girl continues to live with her parents. This is then followed by the second stage, transferal. The young woman is now brought into the home of the husband, an extended household which can number as much as a hundred persons at any one time. Because of the big household, it was particularly difficult for a newlywed bride to feel accepted in such complexity. Miriam was part of a big and multigenerational household which was probably active and noisy. In this household, she was daughter, sister, wife, and mother where she had to do daily tasks like processing food, making clothing, doing backyard gardening, taking care of animals, and of course, taking care of the young children. Miriam was a poor woman who worked hard. One who had a strong, maybe muscled, body and sun burnt skin. She must be very similar to many poor working women in third world countries today.

During her lifetime, Israel was ruled by the Herods. Herod the Great ruled from 37 BCE to 4 CE. Herod was a violent man. In 20 BCE, he began a major magnificent restoration of the Second Temple. This meant heavier taxes for the people. He died in 4 CE (about 2 years after the birth of Jesus). After his death, resentment exploded in revolt all over Palestine. Facing widespread uproar, the Romans responded with brutal efficiency. Villages were burned and the inhabitants were sold to slavery. In the villages around Sepphoris such as Nazareth, the people would have had vivid memories both of the outburst against Herod and the Romans and the destruction of their villages and the enslavements of their friends and relatives. At this time, Miriam would have been around fifteen or sixteen years old, a young married woman with a small baby.

Later, near the end of her life, she had to suffer the execution of her son by crucifixion, by the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. After the death of her Son, Miriam becomes a member of the post-resurrection community of Jesus' followers. This woman was surely no stranger to poverty, injustice, violence and social dislocation. As a young Jewish girl, she was afraid, confused, she did not understand. It is in this context that she heard God's call and she said "yes." In the harshness of life in first century Palestine under the Roman Empire, she lived out her "yes" daily and lived it out even beyond her Son's death. At the end, we remember her, not only as her Son's mother but also as her Son's follower.

## V. MARY IN SCRIPTURE

Let us now look at the portrait of Mary in Scripture, particularly in Luke-Acts and in the fourth Gospel. Luke-Acts presents Mary as the first disciple of Jesus and the model believer. Mary dominates the Lukan infancy narratives. In these first two chapters of Luke, we see Mary being called to become the mother of God's Son and responding to this call (Luke 1:26-39). We also see her going "in haste" to her cousin Elizabeth and we hear her sing of God's greatness (Lk. 1:39-56) in response to words of praise directed to her. In her Magnificat, Raymond Brown calls her a prophet and the spokeswoman of the Christian *anawim*, the poor of YHWH. We see in her the image of a beautiful and concerned mother, wrapping her son in swaddling clothes. We witness her confusion during the birth of Jesus, the presentation and the losing at the temple and we are inspired by her response of pondering things in her heart, seeing in her a woman engaged in profound theological reflection. Luke's last reference to her (in Acts 1:14) shows her with the post-Easter community waiting for the coming of the Spirit telling us that this

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<sup>15[15]</sup>The following discussion on the marriage process is taken from Bertrand Buby, *Mary of Galilee: Woman of Israel, Daughter of Zion*, Vol II. (Alba House, New York, 1995) 51-54

woman who as a young girl said “Yes” in Luke 1 never took that “yes” back. Luke also presents her to us as a virgin, one who was open and receptive to God’s creative spirit. “The child is totally God’s work, a new creation...she (Mary) was not longing or asking for a child, she simply experiences the surprise of creation.”<sup>16[16]</sup> Luke describes a disciple and believer as one “who hears the word of God and keeps it.” This is in fact the image that Luke paints when he has Mary saying “I am the servant of the Lord, let it be done to me according to your word.” It is the image of an active woman, who follows Jesus around as a disciple, listening to God’s word and living it in her life as mother to her Son.

In the fourth Gospel, she is not identified by name but simply called the “mother of Jesus.” We see her in two significant scenes, at the wedding at Cana (Jn. 2) and at the foot of the cross (Jn.19), the beginning and end of Jesus’ ministry. In the wedding at Cana, we hear the only words the mother of Jesus uttered in the whole gospel – “They have no wine” and “Do whatever he tells you.” These words have been interpreted in so many ways over the years. Let me share with you the interpretation of Elizabeth Johnson.<sup>17[17]</sup> “Her words and her deeds offer an intriguing portrait of a woman as a leader and a catalyst in the mission of Jesus. Mary sees that the wine has ran out and so acting in a decisive and confident manner, Mary named the need and took the initiative to seek a solution. Far from silent, she speaks; far from passive, she acts; far from receptive to the orders of the male, she goes counter to his wishes, finally bringing him along with her; far from yielding to a grievous situation, she takes charge of it organizing matters to bring about benefit to those in need. Seen from this perspective then, Mary stands in solidarity with women around the world who struggle for social justice for themselves and for their children. In addition, this challenging plea from Mary addresses the conscience of the body of Christ today... They have no wine, no food, no clean drinking water... you need to act!”

In this Gospel, Jesus addresses also his mother as “Woman.” Scholars agree that this is not a sign of disrespect. Rather, as a way by which Jesus invites his mother to a different level of relationship, a relationship of faith. Here, his mother is being invited to discipleship. At the foot of the cross, we are assured that the mother of Jesus accepted the invitation for we see her there, with the beloved disciple, constituting the new family of Jesus, a family of faith. There we see them as model disciples. In accepting the call to discipleship, Mary does not abandon her role of being mother to Jesus. In fact, her motherhood even expands. She now becomes not only the mother of the beloved disciple but the mother in the community of believing disciples. The question we now ask is how best can we understand Mary’s motherhood?

I would like to propose an understanding of Mary’s motherhood based on Dorothy Lee’s<sup>18[18]</sup> symbolic reading of the fourth gospel. For Lee, motherhood has its location in Jesus himself and she explains this by going back to the bread of life discourse in John 6. There Jesus says “those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me” (Jn. 6:56) and “whoever eats me will live because of me” (Jn. 6:57b). Jesus here is not referring to cannibalism but to feeding on a living person. What is this but the image of a mother breastfeeding a child (or a fetus in the womb of its mother). I believe Lee shows us the proper way of understanding motherhood, a motherhood that gives its own flesh and blood that the other may live. I propose

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<sup>16[16]</sup>Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives of Matthew and Luke*, Updated ed, (Doubleday, New York, 1993) 302, footnote 19

<sup>17[17]</sup>Elizabeth Johnson, 288-291

<sup>18[18]</sup>Dorothy Lee, *Flesh and Glory: Symbolism, Gender and Theology in the Gospel of John*, (The Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, 2002), See chapter 8: Giving Birth – Symbols of Motherhood, pages 135-165.

that we understand Mary's motherhood in this way too. Not in terms of privileges but in terms of Jesus' spiritual motherhood, a motherhood that gives flesh and blood so others may live.

In summary, whether we look at Mary historically or textually, what we see is the image of her as mother and as a follower of Jesus. As mother, her life was not really a bed of roses. As disciple, she said "yes" and lived it out even in the context of poverty, injustice, and violence.

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

We have seen that contemporary research and biblical studies paint Mary as mother-disciple. I believe that today, it is more fitting and relevant to understand Our Lady of the Sacred Heart as "Mother-Disciple" of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, rather than as intercessor and dispenser of graces. If we relate to Our Lady as "mother-disciple," we cannot just wait for her to give out God's graces. We will not be satisfied with just asking for her intercession. Why? Because when we pray to her and call her MOTHER, we see in her the many suffering mothers mourning the loss of their children. We hear her say to us "they have no wine, no food, no drinking water, no homes, no peace... YOU do something about it!" We see her challenging us to give our own flesh and blood that others may live. As we pray to her and call her DISCIPLE, we hear our own call to discipleship. We are invited to hear the word of God, ponder it in our hearts and LIVE IT OUT in our daily lives. Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, Mother-Disciple, calls us to contemplation and to action.

It is now almost 150 years since Fr. Chevalier first pronounced the title Our Lady of the Sacred Heart. He started reflecting on the meaning of the title before he even pronounced it and today, long after he pronounced it, we continue Chevalier's reflection. Like him, we open our eyes to the signs of our times. Like him, we are convinced that the love of God and God's desire to save is much stronger than the evils that we see inside and around us. So like Chevalier, we do not lose hope. Rather, we listen to God's voice as we hear Mary say "Do whatever he tells you." One hundred one years ago, Father Chevalier died yet today we know that he is alive in each one of us and the responsibility of making his charism and spirituality constantly living and effective rests on our shoulders.

In this task, we are not alone. Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, Mother-Disciple of the Sacred Heart of Jesus is with us, bringing hope to seemingly hopeless situations, telling us that "something can be done" and accompanying us in our struggle as we make God's kingdom a reality, here and now.

### **Reflection Questions:**

1. What situations of hopelessness do you see and/or experience in your own personal lives and communities?
2. Imagine Our Lady of the Sacred Heart in those situations of hopelessness, recalling how she lived her life on earth, what do you think will she do in the said situations? Imagine her speaking to you, what is she saying?
3. Our Lady of the Sacred Heart heard her call and lived it out in courageous fidelity, how about you? What is God's call to you as a lay associate of the Chevalier family? How are you living out your call? What is Jesus telling you to do? (As an individual and as an organization).

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