

THE MARIAN DIMENSION
of
THE MSC CHARISM
OUR LADY OF THE SACRED HEART
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Place of Mary in life of Jules Chevalier

The place of Mary in the piety of the Church during last century was quite different from that of today. At that time there was, by today's standards, an overly "pious", almost sentimental, devotion to Mary which, in its extreme expression, tended to supplant any direct approach to Jesus. In the 1800's there had been two major Apparitions of Mary in France: the Apparition to St Catherine Labore at Rue de Bac in Paris and the Apparition to St Bernadette at Lourdes. As he was growing up Jules Chevalier must have been influenced by the widespread and enthusiastic devotion to Mary these apparitions gave rise to throughout France.

Jules' father was a reasonably educated man from a family that had once been quite prosperous but had lost everything. He was not a practicing Catholic. Jules' mother would be regarded as quite uneducated had she been living today. She was not regular in Church attendance but was a very good woman who had within her and lived what was considered to be a modicum of contemporary French piety. One of her concerns, after having Jules baptised, was to have him consecrated to the Blessed Virgin.

The Chevalier family was poor. Together husband and wife ran a baker's shop in Richelieu, a small town about 200km to the west of Issoudun. Jules was the fourth arrival in a family that already could hardly make ends meet. His father was exasperated at having another mouth to feed. One day while still a young baby Jules frustrated his father so much by his constant crying that he angrily reproached his wife and stormed off, leaving her in the middle of the town square to cope with the crying child. Jules' mother who at the time was excessively tired and discouraged picked up the baby and sought refuge in the parish church about 100m away on the other side of the square. Jules would not stop crying and her irritation grew to the point where she laid him on the sanctuary steps beneath the statue of Our Lady of Miracles and said, "Well, my good Virgin, if he is always to give me as much trouble as today, you can have him and do what you like with him." After that, she marched out of the church and went home, leaving the baby Jules there crying in front of the statue. Fortunately, she quickly calmed down and shamefacedly returned to the church, scooped up Jules and went back home. (PIP 27-8)

That was a dramatic and somewhat indirect way to consecrate a child to the Blessed Virgin, but the fact that it had happened as it did made a lifelong impression on Jules Chevalier and certainly focused him early on the important place he saw Mary had in his life. He never forgot this incident, and referred to it often, although he did admit that his mother embellished and glamourised it somewhat when she retold it in her later years.

In his youth Jules was influenced, as was the piety of most French people, by the apparition of Mary to Cathcrinc Laboure. This occurred in 1830 when Jules was 6 years old. From it was born a great movement of Marian devotion in France propagated through the millions of miraculous medals that were distributed throughout the country as Jules was growing up.

There is a gap in our knowledge of what happened in the Chevalier family as Jules passed through his childhood years in Richelieu. There is no indication that the family as a whole became any more regular in its religious practice, but Jules himself became very attached to the parish church and its priest. He became a regular altar server and began to do many charitable deeds for families in need in the town. From an early age he became determined to be a priest.

There was a strong local devotion to "Our Lady of Miracles", with its focal point an ancient statue of Mother and Child in the Richelieu parish church. This devotion attracted a number of people to this church to pray before the "miraculous" statue where Jules as a baby had been left by his mother. The origins and rationale of this particular local devotion are hidden in the past and are much older than the town of Richelieu itself which Cardinal Richelieu built to house his retinue early in the 17th century.

From his major seminary days Jules had a dream of founding an Order of "Missionaries of the Sacred Heart" While he was assistant priest at Issoudun he shared his dream with Emile Maugenest, his fellow assistant priest and friend from seminary days. He said of this dream: "If this is God's work it will succeed in spite of everything. Let us pray." The manner of their prayer was prompted by Jules' lifelong devotion to Mary and the occasion chosen he described thus: "Circumstances could not be better as the Church is about to proclaim the dogma of the Immaculate Conception; in honour of this glorious prerogative, so beneficial to the world, let us then ask Mary herself to found this Society." (PN 107)

The facts concerning Mary's part in founding the Society are quite clear. The two young priests at Issoudun put their trust in their prayer. They asked for some clear sign that this was to be God's work. "We made a novena to end on December 8 1854 and on that very day we learnt that some charitable person was allocating us twenty thousand francs for the establishment of a good work in Berry (the district in which Issoudun is located). " (PN 107)

However, it was not all plain sailing. The Archbishop quite wisely would not give his approval unless the two young priests were also assured of a regular income to live on. He said "Providence is very good, but we must not tempt it. I can't authorise you to form any group until you have assured and adequate revenue. If God wants your work, he can provide for your needs. Pray to the Blessed Virgin to finish what she has so well begun."

Jules writes of this, "Far from losing heart, we had swift recourse to our powerful *Protectress*, nine days before the Feast of the Holy and Immaculate Heart; and the better to interest her in our endeavours, we entered into the following contract with her."(PN 107)

This contract (quoted in full in PN 108-9) incorporated Mary into Jules' original dream in a special way. From this point on it was no longer just a dream of making the Sacred Heart of Jesus known and loved. Mary's heart was now linked in his dream with that of Jesus, and the

person of Mary linked with the person of Jesus. Article II of the contract stated: "The Missionaries of the Sacred Heart will dedicate themselves with a very special love to the adorable Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary, and will devote all their energies to making these two hearts everywhere loved." It is clear from the tenor of this contract that in Jules Chevalier's thinking Jesus and Mary were now for him a "unit". It became impossible for him to think of the one without the other.

The Facts connected with the outcome of this second novena are these. At the end of the novena another generous person promised an annual sum of one thousand francs for the two young priests to live on. This satisfied the Archbishop's misgivings. He then proposed to his council that these two priests be freed to found the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart. The Council unanimously rejected his proposal, "because the two priests were only young, without experience, money or standing; they will be the laughing stock of the clergy and will cave in under the weight of their ridicule." The Archbishop postponed his decision; he was not in the habit of going against his Council, especially against a unanimous decision.

One of the Archbishop's councillors said to Jules: "If you come out on top in this, Mary will have worked a mighty miracle." Jules was advised to forget the matter and consider it closed. Jules replied, "Not so fast! The Blessed Virgin has not given her last word yet; we are going to pray to her." At the next Council meeting, the Archbishop announced, "Gentlemen,....I never hold out against your advice, but for the first time I am going to depart from my usual custom; I think it would be going counter to the designs of Providence if I accepted your judgement. Therefore, I am authorising the two priests of Issoudun to begin their work." After this the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart became known among the clergy of the archdiocese as "the Society for which Mary does everything". (A more complete account can be found in PN p19-25)

"Our Lady of the Sacred Heart"

In his "Personal Notes", Jules Chevalier, writing about the first novena, says, "We promised the Blessed Virgin that, if our prayer was answered, we would call ourselves Missionaries of the Sacred Heart and honour her in a very special manner". It took some years of reflection before Jules was able to determine just what shape this "in a very special manner" would take. Finally, he lighted on the title "Our Lady of the Sacred Heart".

In this one title he put together in the one devotion, presumably for the first time, the two devotions: devotion to the Sacred Heart and devotion to Mary. Over the centuries there had been many titles, pictures and statues of the "Madonna and Child" but for the first time the Hearts of Jesus and Mary were linked as a unit. It was not, as in so many other cases, the result of a revelation or an apparition. This was the fruit of a young priest's reflection following logically from his contemplation on the Divine Motherhood. It was his personal discovery in prayer and meditation, coming, he said, "as a ray of light", illuminating the very essence of our religion. It was no new theory or doctrine. It was simply the expression in a new and striking manner of what the Church has always taught about Mary, linking together devotion to the Sacred Heart and devotion to Mary, in one devotion and under one title.

Statue of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart

Every devotion has its pictorial expression. In the case of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart it first took the form in a stained glass window in the Issoudun Basilica and later more clearly in a statue in the newly built shrine. This statue depicted the two persons of Jesus and Mary - never Mary alone as at Rue de Bac and at Lourdes.

The Mary that Jules depicted was the Mary of Rue de Bac - Mary standing with her arms opened in front of her and her head inclined forward. Jules put Jesus standing between these arms, as a child about 12 years old, the age of Jewish manhood. Whereas in the other well known statues of Mary she is looking and gesturing at us, in Jules' statue she is looking at and drawing our attention to Jesus.

Jesus is standing there looking at us, with his left hand pointing to his Heart and his right hand pointing to his Mother behind Him.

The message of the statue is: Mary is pointing out Jesus to us. At the same time she is contemplating her Son in front of her in peace, wonder and awe. If we look at Mary, we see that she is directing us to Jesus. If we look at Jesus, we see that He is pointing first to his heart as being the very centre and essence of his being and then with his other hand he is pointing up to Mary, saying by this gesture: "If you want to understand my heart, go to my Mother who understands it perfectly. There is a rapport between us that only the two of us know. If you want to unlock the secrets of my heart see my mother. She knows how to go about it. She knows exactly how to get through to me. Remember Canal"

This was the statue which Jules Chevalier devised as the visual expression of what he saw Devotion to Our Lady of the Sacred Heart to be. This is the statue which is enshrined in the Lady Chapel of the Basilica at Issoudun and which is today the focal point of pilgrimage for groups from all over the world. Until 1875 this statue was the only way in which Our Lady of the Sacred Heart was depicted.





However, as in all popular devotions there are aberrations and exaggerations. Some of statues and pictures produced made it look as though Mary dominated Jesus, especially when the child at the feet of his mother was made too small. Also the flowery and grandiose language of the times often did not convey correctly the relationship between the Mother and Child. So the authorities in Rome showed concern for this representation of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart and decreed that in future visual representations of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart were to be made more in the line of the traditional Madonna and Child. Jesus was to be a young child in his mother's arms. His gestures remained the same and Mary's free hand was pointing to him as before. This is way Our Lady of the Sacred Heart has been depicted for the last 100 years.

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The Vatican Council brought about another change in thinking in this devotion. The Council urged us to get back to the theological and scriptural sources of our devotions.

To do this with devotion to Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, it meant going back to the relationship between Jesus and Mary. The scriptural source of our spirituality of the heart is mainly in Jesus dead on the cross with his heart pierced . "They will look upon the one they have pierced." Mary at the foot of the Cross is part of that source. She looked, she contemplated and she understood. She is His mother. Jesus gives her to us as our mother to help us come to an understanding of the length and breadth and height and depth of the love our God has for us. It could be said that this is a much more "mature" way of understanding the essential message of "Our Lady of the Sacred Heart" that Jules Chevalier left us. So today there is an alternative image of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart being offered to us. It is the image of Jesus on the Cross, already dead, serene and peaceful now that his mission has been accomplished and the final expression of his love for us is made. His head is inclined to Mary who gazes at him with agonised understanding, pointing to his pierced heart with one hand and holding the other hand open towards us. The message is the same as in the original statue. The body language and the situation portrayed are scriptural and the very centre of our religion.

In the Chapel of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart at Issoudun traditional devotions are publicly prayed before Jules Chevalier's original statue with enthusiastic piety. This is where many thousands of pilgrims are at in their personal piety.

On the sanctuary of the basilica itself there is another image of the same devotion. On either side of the main altar are the larger-than-lifesize figures of Jesus on the Cross on the one side and of Mary his Mother on the other, standing there using the gestures described above. From the contemplation of these figures one can see the scriptural and theological underpinning, as well as a new visual expression of devotion to Our Lady of the Sacred Heart. As I see it, the Holy Spirit is at work in this and we need to stand back and watch where He is leading us. Maybe the devotion needs both images to stand side by side in people's practice of the devotion.

What did Jules Chevalier want to express by this new name "Our Lady of the Sacred Heart"? In the first place: gratitude. He kept repeating over and over again that Mary has done everything for the Society; we owe so much to Mary. We must "honour her in a very special manner" out of gratitude for what she has done for us, if for no other reason. This much he promised her and made that promise on behalf of all future MSC. Jules Chevalier added that he wanted to express that "The title of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart demonstrates Mary's position in relation to the Heart of her Son." - Mary is united with Jesus in a mutual relationship of love and trust and unity and, because of this bond, the bond of mother and child, Mary can do many things for us.

Our Lady of the Sacred Heart in the life of M.S.C.

Devotion to Our Lady of the Sacred Heart spread in an extraordinary way throughout Europe and then through missionary countries. This cannot be explained just by the enthusiasm and zeal of the early Missionaries of the Sacred Heart in propagating this devotion. Time and again in the growth of the Society, the MSC moved into a hitherto unknown area and found devotion to Our Lady of the Sacred Heart already established there. This happened last century in Belgium, England, Spain, the Netherlands, Brazil, Dominican Republic, Venezuela, Guatemala. More recently the same happened in Curacao, El Salvador, India, Slovakia. Our Lady of the Sacred Heart was already there waiting for us. This can seem just a nice pious way of thinking about it - but the fact is, it is true.

Our Lady of the Sacred Heart in our personal lives?

Our Founder made a promise to Mary on our behalf. If we are to commit ourselves to being MSC as professed or associate members, then we commit ourselves to keeping that promise. Essentially that promise concerns our honouring Mary "in a very special manner" because it was through her manifest intervention that the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart were founded.

Devotion to Mary under the title of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart is the very special manner Jules Chevalier has given us to honour Mary and keep that promise. A devotion does not mean a series of practices and prayers. These are of no use unless they are underpinned by a theological and scriptural foundation and flow from the fruit of prayerful reflection. In the case of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart our devotion flows especially from the contemplation of Mary at the foot of the Cross - Mary contemplating her Son Jesus, understanding why his mission should have led him to this, understanding the love for us that drove him in this mission. His Heart was pierced and poured out, so great was his love for us. Mary points this out to us.

Unless our devotion to Our Lady of the Sacred Heart is founded on and flows from such considerations it is not the devotion Jules Chevalier bequeathed to us as part of our charism.

For us MSC Jesus and Mary must be a "unit". In our devotion to Our Lady of the Sacred Heart both Jesus and Mary are bound together whatever image or statue we find speaks best to us. In all our reflections they are Mother and Son, with hearts locked together in an amazing relationship. Jesus gave Mary to us as our Mother and directs us to look upon her as our mother. The greatest thing she wants to share with us, her children, is her understanding of the God's love for us made manifest in the pierced Heart of Jesus.