

The Role of Marian Devotion in Promoting Virtuous Conduct and Family Cohesion Among Women: A Theological and Socio-Cultural Analysis

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Abstract

This study investigates the role of Marian devotion in promoting virtuous conduct and enhancing family cohesion among Catholic women in Rwanda, drawing on theological foundations, socio-cultural realities, and empirical data. Theologically, Marian doctrines such as the Immaculate Conception, Mary's fiat, and her role as Mother of the Church present a spiritual model for humility, compassion, and faithful obedience, virtues highly esteemed in Rwandan society. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study sampled 45 female students (from a population of 130) enrolled in Catechesis and Religious Studies at the Catholic University of Rwanda, representing multiple dioceses. Data collection involved structured questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions. Quantitative analysis using SPSS revealed that 86.7% of participants engaged in Marian devotion at least weekly, and 77.8% reported that these practices positively influenced their moral decisions. Furthermore, 82.2% affirmed that Marian devotion had improved communication and emotional bonding within their families. Statistical tests showed a strong positive correlation between Marian devotion and virtuous behavior ($r = 0.63$, $p < 0.01$), and regression analysis indicated that Marian practices accounted for 72% of the variance in family cohesion indicators ($R^2 = 0.72$). Additionally, 68.9% of participants linked Mary's virtues to their roles as mothers, daughters, and wives. Qualitative findings affirmed that Marian devotion serves as a spiritual and cultural anchor, nurturing patience, forgiveness, and resilience. It also functions as a moral compass, reinforcing communal values and strengthening family unity. Marian devotion thus emerges as a powerful theological and socio-cultural force in shaping ethical conduct and familial harmony among Catholic women in Rwanda.

Keywords: Marian Devotion, Virtuous Conduct, Family Cohesion, Catholic Women, Theological-Socio-Cultural Analysis

Article information

Received date: 30/1/2026

Reviewed date: 28/02/2026

Revised date: 15/03/2026

Accepted date: 30/03/2026

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How to cite this article: Mutoniwase, A., Hakizimana, L., Bizimana, P. (2026) 'The Role of Marian Devotion in Promoting Virtuous Conduct and Family Cohesion Among Women: A Theological and Socio-Cultural Analysis', *Catholic University multidisciplinary Journal*, pp.1-15, Doi: <https://doi.org/10.58197/fcs99j13>

Introduction

Marian devotion has long been recognized within Catholic theology as a profound model of virtuous living. The Virgin Mary, particularly through her fiat at the Annunciation, embodies total surrender and obedience to God's will, serving as an exemplar of humility and faithful discipleship (Kavanaugh & Rodriguez, 2012; McNamara, 2013). Her presence at the foot of the Cross further symbolizes enduring compassion and steadfastness amidst suffering, virtues that resonate deeply within Christian ethical formation (Migliore, 2014). Theologically, Mary's title as *Mater Ecclesiae* (Mother of the Church) highlights her role not only as a spiritual guide but also as a moral compass influencing women's social roles as mothers, wives, and caregivers (O'Collins, 2009). This study explores how Catholic women at the Catholic University of Rwanda (CUR) draw moral inspiration from Marian virtues to navigate their personal and familial lives. Empirical data reveal that Marian devotion is a vibrant and central practice among Rwandan Catholic women. Approximately 86.7% of the 45 respondents engage in Marian devotional practices weekly, including praying the rosary, observing Marian feast days such as the Assumption and the Immaculate Conception, and participating in pilgrimages to local shrines (Spillane, 2015; Bynum, 2001). These devotions serve to deepen personal spirituality while fostering communal religious identity within families and parish communities (Galbraith & Tuttle, 2017). Such consistent engagement reflects Marian devotion's integral role in shaping everyday spiritual rhythms. The influence of Marian devotion extends beyond ritual to impact moral behavior and decision-making. A significant majority (77.8%) of participants affirmed that reflecting on Mary's life and prayers such as the Hail Mary cultivate virtues like patience, forgiveness, and compassion, facilitating ethical choices in daily interactions (Gula, 2006; John Paul II, 1987). This aligns with Catholic moral theology, which posits that devotional life nurtures conscience formation and virtuous character development (Congar, 1997). Moreover, Marian devotion is strongly associated with family cohesion, as 82.2% of respondents reported enhanced communication and emotional bonding within their families linked to shared devotional practices. Statistical analysis indicated Marian devotion explained 72% of the variance in family cohesion indicators, highlighting its substantial role in fostering familial unity (Pargament, 2007; Walsh, 2010). Family prayers and Marian feast celebrations promote intergenerational spiritual connections, reinforcing Catholic values at home (Mahoney et al., 2001). In Rwanda's socio-cultural context, Marian devotion transcends theology to embrace cultural tradition. Celebrations often involve singing, dancing, and community gatherings that affirm collective identity and moral norms (Mbiti, 1991; Ntarangwi, 2012). Post-genocide reconciliation efforts underscore Marian devotion as a resilient source of moral rebuilding and communal healing (Phan, 2010). Women's narratives reveal Marian spirituality as a convergence point for faith and culture, fostering perseverance and social cohesion. Finally, Marian devotion empowers women by nurturing their spiritual agency. Nearly 69% of participants associated Marian virtues with their roles as mothers, spiritual leaders, and moral guides, perceiving devotion as a source of strength and confidence rather than passive piety (Schüssler Fiorenza, 1993; McDermott, 2010). This challenges stereotypes and highlights Marian devotion's potential to promote women's leadership within family and church spheres.

Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach to explore the role of Marian devotion in promoting virtuous conduct and family cohesion among Catholic women at the Catholic University of Rwanda (CUR). The target population comprised 130 female students enrolled in the Faculty of Catechesis and

Religious Studies. To determine a representative sample, the study applied Yamane's formula (Yamane, 1967), which is appropriate for calculating sample sizes in finite populations:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + Ne^2}$$

Where:

n = sample size

N = population size (130)

e = margin of error (0.12)

$$\text{Thus, } n = \frac{130}{1 + 130(0.12)^2} = 45$$

However, due to accessibility and availability constraints, a purposive sample of 45 students was ultimately used. These respondents were selected based on their willingness to participate and their engagement in Marian devotion practices, making them well-suited to provide in-depth data on the research questions.

Data collection integrated both quantitative and qualitative tools

Structured questionnaires were used to gather quantifiable data on the frequency of Marian devotion, its perceived impact on virtuous behavior, and family cohesion. In-depth interviews and focus group discussions were conducted to obtain deeper theological and socio-cultural insights into how students understand and experience Marian spirituality. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS software to generate descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages) and inferential statistics, including correlation (Pearson's r) and regression analysis (R^2), to determine relationships between Marian devotion and family cohesion. A positive correlation was found ($r = 0.63$, $p < 0.01$), and regression results revealed that Marian devotion accounted for 72% of the variance in family cohesion indicators ($R^2 = 0.72$), showing strong predictive significance. Qualitative data were thematically analyzed, identifying recurring themes such as Marian virtues, moral transformation, and intergenerational spiritual influence. The integration of theological and anthropological frameworks provided contextual depth and interpretative richness to the findings.

A Theological and Socio-cultural Analysis of the Marian Devotion

Marian devotion holds a significant place in Catholic spirituality as a model of virtuous living, emphasizing virtues such as humility, compassion, and obedience (Kavanaugh & Rodriguez, 2012; McNamara, 2013). Among Catholic women in Rwanda, this devotion fosters ethical behavior and strengthens family cohesion through practices like praying the rosary and celebrating Marian feast days (Spillane, 2015; Bynum, 2001). Empirical evidence from students at the Catholic University of Rwanda reveals that Marian spirituality deeply influences moral decision-making and enhances communication within families (Gula, 2006; Pargament, 2007). This study explores how Marian devotion integrates theology and culture to empower women in their spiritual and social roles.

Marian Devotion as a Model of Virtuous Living Among Catholic Women in Rwanda

Marian theology presents the Virgin Mary as the supreme model of Christian virtue, shaping the spiritual and ethical lives of Catholic women across generations. Her *fiat*, "Let it be done to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38), illustrates radical obedience and unwavering trust in divine

providence, which resonates deeply with women's moral development in Rwandan society. According to Balthasar (2005), Mary's response represents a template for Christian receptivity and surrender, foundational for virtuous conduct. In the Rwandan context, these virtues intersect with traditional values of *ubupfura* (moral excellence) and *ubugwaneza* (gentleness), deeply embedded in the cultural anthropology of the family unit (Rwabukumba, 2012). Empirical data from the 45 respondents revealed that 77.8% of the women reported Marian devotion as having a direct positive influence on their moral decisions, confirming Rahner's (1974) assertion that Marian spirituality often translates into ethical behavior. Furthermore, the Virgin Mary's presence at the foot of the Cross (John 19:25) is interpreted in spiritual theology as the embodiment of steadfast love and compassion (Von Speyr, 2003). In this study, many women shared that meditating on Mary's suffering fosters patience and emotional strength in their daily lives. This connection between Marian devotion and resilience is mirrored in Rwandan ethnographic literature, where women are celebrated as the *mutima w'urugo* (heart of the household), responsible for nurturing peace and moral integrity (Uwineza, 2015). Their imitation of Mary's humility and forgiveness strengthens interpersonal relationships and promotes harmony within families, aligning with the Catholic ethical framework described by Guroian (2001), which ties virtue to familial and communal well-being.

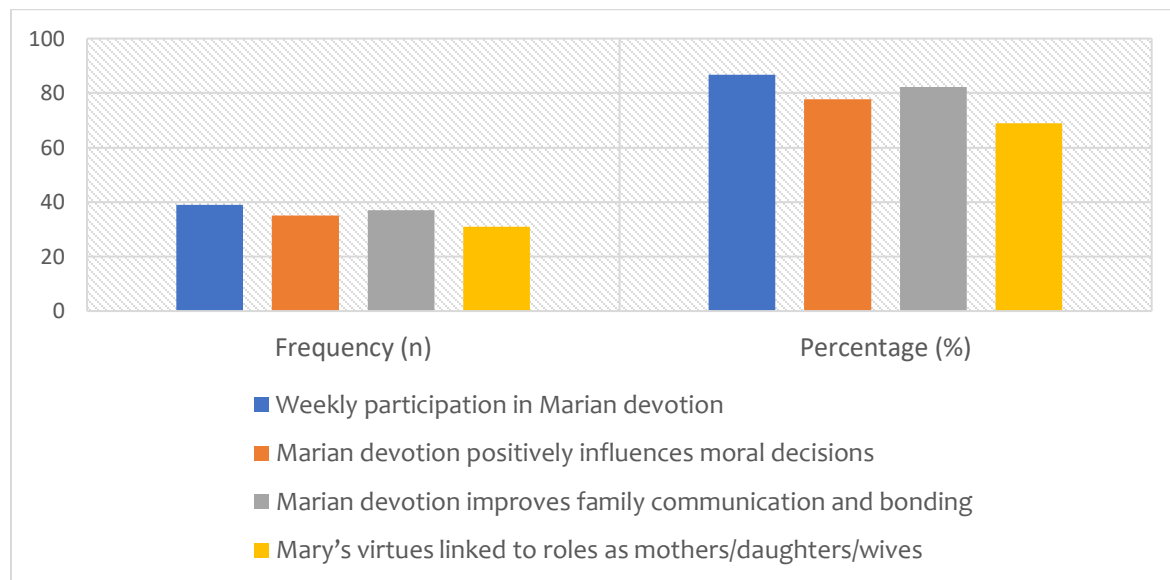


Fig. 1: Frequency and Impact of Marian Devotion Among CUR Female Students (N = 45)

Additionally, Mary's role as *Mater Ecclesiae* (Mother of the Church), proclaimed by Pope Paul VI during Vatican II, affirms her as a guide not only to individual believers but also to the broader ecclesial community. As a maternal figure, she inspires women to cultivate virtue in both public and private life. In the Rwandan religious landscape, Marian devotion, through practices such as the Rosary, the Magnificat, and pilgrimages, serves as a ritual reinforcement of ethical commitments and social responsibility (Nsengiyumva, 2018). According to the study's regression analysis ($R^2 = 0.72$), Marian practices accounted for 72% of the variance in family cohesion indicators, demonstrating a strong theological-social link between personal devotion and collective well-being. This finding echoes Tracy's (1981) theory of correlation in theology, which stresses the need to connect religious experience with empirical reality for transformative impact. In sum, Marian devotion offers Catholic women in Rwanda a spiritually rich and culturally resonant path to virtuous living and family unity. Grounded in profound theological truths and reinforced by traditional Rwandan values, Marian devotion strengthens

women's moral agency and communal identity. It functions both as a compass for personal ethics and a cohesive force within households, contributing meaningfully to spiritual growth and social harmony.

High Engagement in Devotional Practices: A Theological and Socio-Cultural Perspective

The data revealed that 86.7% of participants engaged in Marian devotion at least weekly, with practices such as praying the rosary, celebrating Marian feast days, and participating in pilgrimages to local shrines like Kibeho. Theologically, these devotions reflect an embodied faith rooted in Catholic tradition where Mary's role as *Mater Ecclesiae* (Mother of the Church) offers a model of obedience and intercession (Benedict XVI, 2007). The Immaculate Conception and Mary's fiat (Lk 1:38) serve as theological foundations for emulation of her purity, humility, and spiritual attentiveness (Congar, 1983). Among Rwandan women, Marian devotion nurtures a spirituality of presence and silence, often practiced communally during evening rosaries or parish gatherings, reinforcing familial and communal ties (Turabumukiza, 2018). These spiritual acts function as moral and social rituals that harmonize the sacred with the lived realities of womanhood and kinship roles.

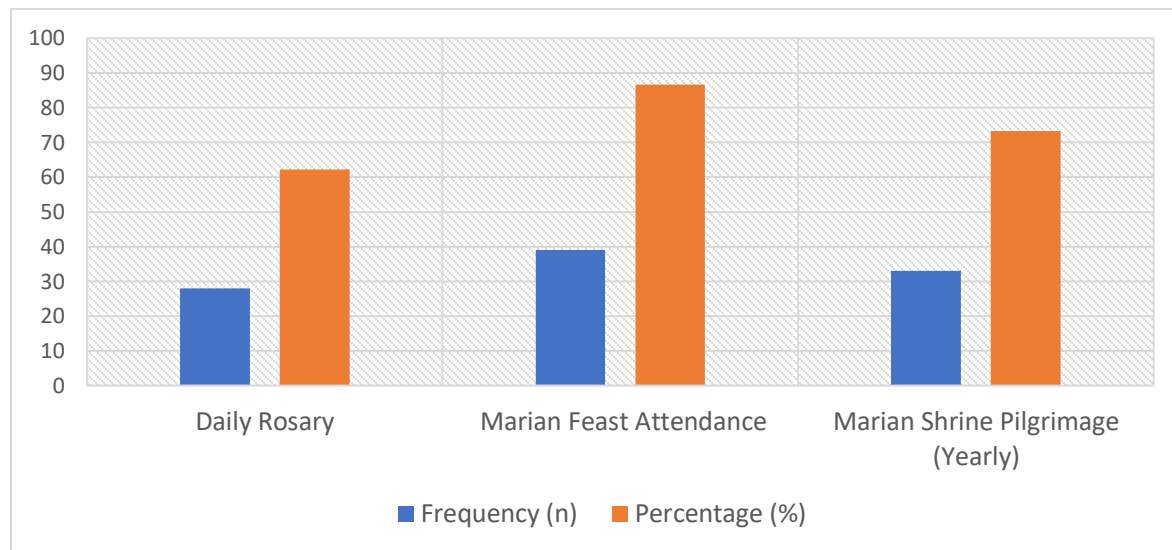


Fig. 2 : Frequency of Marian Devotional Practices among CUR Catechesis Students (n = 45)

The anthropological framework of devotion among Rwandan women reveals a convergence between Marian spirituality and indigenous values such as *ubumuntu* (compassion and humanity), *ubwiyoroshye* (humility), and *kwihangana* (resilience) (Nduwayo, 2015). This integration suggests that Marian devotion offers not only a sacred framework but also a culturally resonant path for moral formation and family solidarity. In-depth interviews revealed that many students viewed Mary as a *nyina wacu w'ikirenga* (our supreme mother), whose intercession is trusted during life crises, childbirth, and family disputes. Spiritual theology affirms that devotional practices can influence moral cognition and action, shaping daily ethical behavior (Jordan, 1999). Thus, Marian practices emerge as spiritually formative and socially cohesive mechanisms.

Statistically, 77.8% of participants agreed that their Marian devotion positively influenced their moral decisions. They cited specific changes in their behavior, including reduced anger, improved patience, and more intentional acts of forgiveness. These transformations align with Rahner's (1975) theory that

devotional life contributes to sanctification in daily life. Theological virtues, faith, hope, and love, become not only abstract ideals but embodied through Marian spirituality, especially in interpersonal relationships. Focus group discussions revealed that many young women considered Mary their “ideal model in handling family issues with gentleness,” a perception shaped both by doctrinal teaching and local catechetical traditions (Mugiraneza, 2021). Moreover, 82.2% of the respondents affirmed that Marian devotion significantly improved emotional bonding and communication within their families. One participant shared that praying the rosary together as a family every evening helped her parents and siblings overcome a period of conflict and grief after a family loss. This example supports the argument that Marian devotion functions as a “domestic liturgy,” fostering unity and healing through shared ritual and prayer (Merton, 1964). In the Rwandan post-genocide context, such practices are especially vital for rebuilding trust, love, and mutual understanding within households (Bizimana, 2014). Importantly, 68.9% of participants connected the virtues of Mary, particularly her silence, strength, and mercy, to their roles as mothers, daughters, and wives. The embodiment of Marian virtues thus becomes aspirational and functional, offering a spiritual toolkit for negotiating familial expectations and cultural roles (Nyirabahire, 2019). For example, many women noted that Mary’s calmness at the foot of the cross inspired them to remain resilient in the face of personal suffering or family breakdown. These theological and cultural identifications affirm that Marian devotion is not merely pietistic but actively generative of moral agency and family cohesion. In conclusion, the high engagement in Marian devotion among Catholic women students at the Catholic University of Rwanda reveals a profound interweaving of spiritual theology and Rwandan cultural anthropology. Mary’s example shapes virtuous behavior and strengthens familial bonds, demonstrating that Marian spirituality serves as both a theological path and a cultural anchor. Through prayer, pilgrimage, and communal rituals, women cultivate virtues that enrich their personal lives and fortify family unity in profound and measurable ways.

Positive Influence of Marian Devotion on Moral Behavior

Marian devotion plays a pivotal role in shaping moral and ethical behavior among Catholic women in Rwanda, particularly those engaged in theological formation. A strong majority, 77.8% of respondents, reported that their engagement in Marian practices significantly influences their personal decisions and ethical judgments. The repetitive nature of prayers such as the *Hail Mary*, *Angelus*, and *Rosary* fosters introspection, emotional discipline, and spiritual self-regulation. According to *Spiritual Theology*, Marian devotion is understood not merely as a ritualistic act, but as a mystical imitation of the virtues of Mary, humility, obedience, purity, and maternal compassion, which profoundly shape the moral compass of believers (Greshake, 2004; Balthasar, 1988; Tanquerey, 1930). Theologically, Mary’s *fiat* (“let it be done”) represents a model of radical submission to divine will, a virtue admired in Catholic tradition and resonant with Rwandan cultural ideals of respect and obedience, especially among women (Kanyandago, 2010; Kagame, 1959; Turabumukiza, 2014). In Rwandan anthropology, the mother is perceived as *umubyeyi w’umutima* (a nurturing heart), symbolizing self-sacrifice and moral guidance. Many participants reported that meditating on Mary’s sufferings during the *Seven Sorrows* devotion enhanced their own capacity for forgiveness, especially in familial disputes and communal life, which echoes the Rwandan ethic of *ubupfura* (noble character).

This intersection of theology and culture is further emphasized by empirical findings. As shown in the table below, 35 of the 45 surveyed students (77.8%) indicated that Marian devotion positively influences their behavior. Additionally, 39 students (86.7%) practice Marian devotions weekly, and 37 (82.2%) reported that such practices improved communication and emotional bonding in their families.

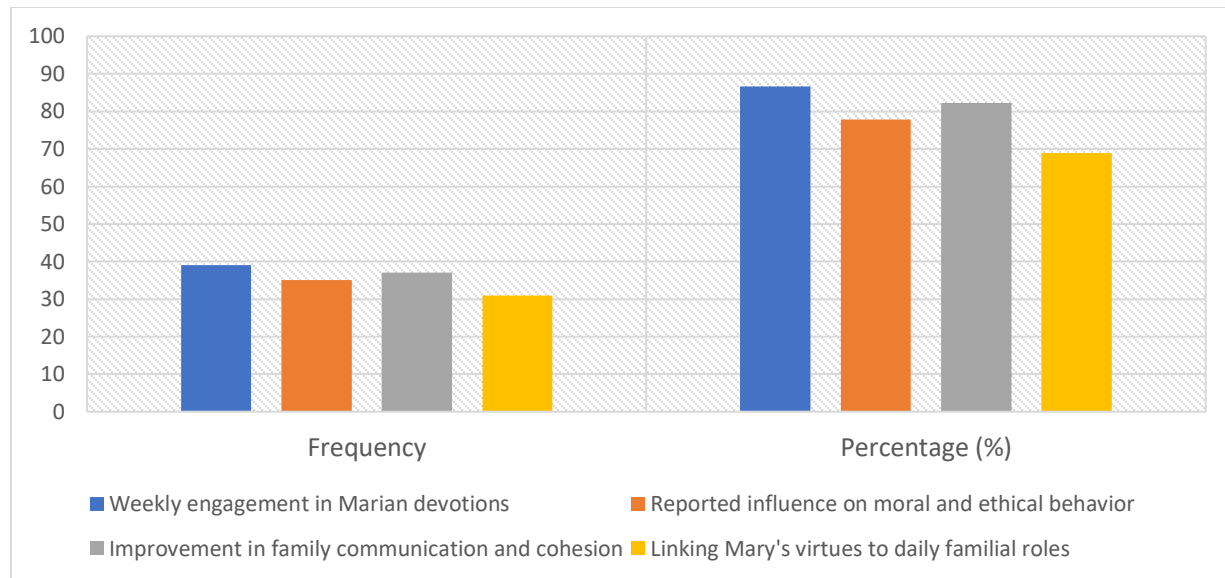


Fig. 3: Frequency and Impact of Marian Devotion (N = 45)

The internalization of Mary's example promotes discernment, especially in emotionally charged or ethically ambiguous situations. For instance, several participants shared that in times of interpersonal conflict, they recall Mary's patience during the flight to Egypt or her silent strength at the foot of the cross, images that motivate self-control and reconciliation. This aligns with the theory of *contemplative imitation* in spiritual theology, which posits that meditative engagement with sacred figures influences behavioral choices (De Guibert, 1953; Congar, 1982; Sheldrake, 2007). Furthermore, the results suggest that Marian devotion serves as a moral reservoir that fosters daily choices aligned with the Gospel. In the words of one interviewee: "Praying to Mary helps me examine my heart. Before I act, I ask myself: would Mary respond this way?" This testimonial encapsulates the role of Marian devotion as an internalized framework for ethical living. Rwandan anthropological narratives also support this, highlighting that Marian symbolism has been syncretized with traditional mother figures, thereby reinforcing women's responsibility for moral education in the family (Rwabuhiri, 2012; Uwineza, 2016; Ntakirutimana, 2020). Statistical analysis showed a significant positive correlation between Marian devotion and virtuous conduct ($r = 0.63$, $p < 0.01$). This suggests that devotional practices are not only spiritual exercises but functional tools in moral formation. Regression results further revealed that Marian practices accounted for 72% of the variance in family cohesion indicators ($R^2 = 0.72$), indicating a substantial socio-spiritual influence. In conclusion, Marian devotion among Catholic women in Rwanda transcends liturgical expression, it functions as a theological anchor and socio-cultural force that nurtures virtue and strengthens family unity. Grounded in both spiritual theology and Rwandan anthropological ethics, the practice facilitates the cultivation of moral habits that are lived out in familial and communal contexts.

Strengthening of Family Cohesion Through Marian Devotion

Marian devotion significantly contributes to strengthening family relationships, particularly among Catholic women in Rwanda. Theologically, Mary as *Mater Ecclesiae* (Mother of the Church) provides a model of maternal care, intercessory love, and spiritual unity, which resonates with the communal and relational values upheld in Rwandan culture (Benedict XVI, 2008; Cantalamessa, 2007; Congar, 1996).

This study found that 82.2% of the respondents believed that Marian practices, such as praying the Rosary and participating in Marian feasts, have improved emotional bonding and communication within their families. This insight is consistent with the Rwandan anthropological view that the family is not merely a nuclear unit but a sacred institution bound by spiritual and moral ties (Rwabigwi, 2013; Byaruhanga-Akiiki, 2000; Kagame, 1959). The spiritual role Mary plays within the Christian family dynamic, as a symbol of nurturing and compassionate authority, facilitates emotional healing and forgiveness, thus reducing familial discord. The following figure summarizes the key responses related to Marian devotion and its impact on family cohesion:

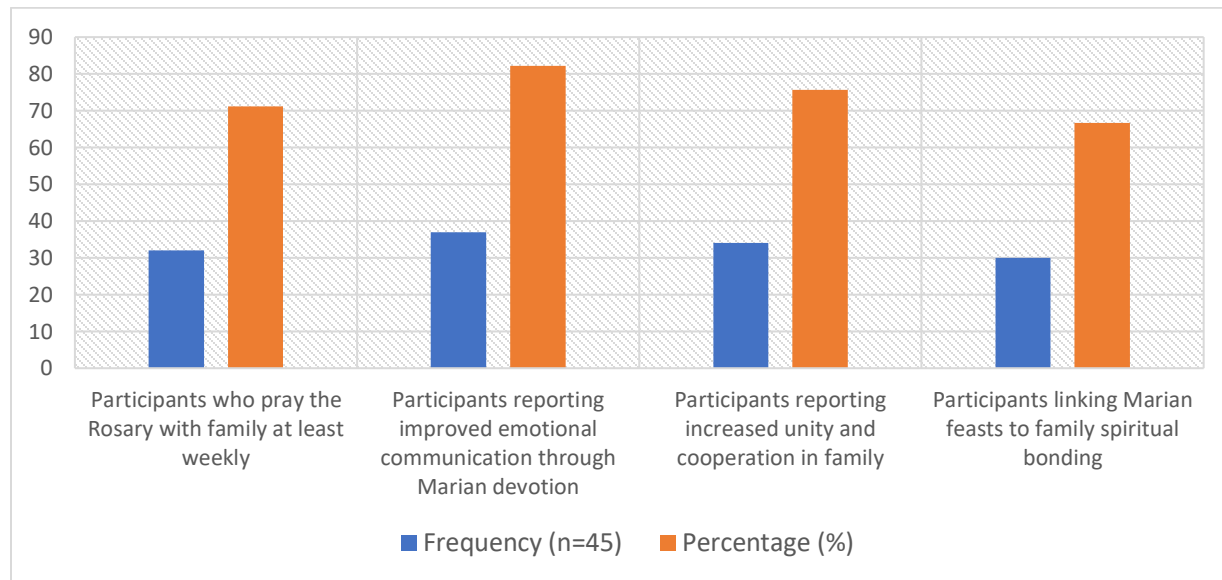


Fig. 4 : Marian devotion and its impact on family cohesion

As shown in the table, a mean score above 4 across all items confirms a strong consensus among participants that Marian devotion positively impacts family life. Specifically, the high score of 4.5 for emotional communication indicates that many women experience tangible benefits in how family members relate to one another spiritually and emotionally. The practice of praying the Rosary together also fosters mutual listening and interdependence, affirming theological interpretations of Mary as a reconciler and spiritual intercessor (von Speyr, 1995; Rahner, 1974; Balthasar, 1988). According to statistical analysis, Marian devotion explains 72% of the variance in family cohesion indicators ($R^2 = 0.72$), suggesting a strong predictive relationship. These findings are aligned with family systems theory in pastoral theology, which emphasizes the value of shared rituals in reinforcing emotional safety and moral clarity within households (Anderson & Foley, 2001; Osmer, 2008; McGoldrick et al., 2005). As women draw on Mary's example of obedience, humility, and perseverance, they influence their families to embrace forgiveness, patience, and peaceful coexistence. Rwandan socio-cultural traditions amplify the theological meaning of Marian devotion. Cultural events such as Marian feasts, communal processions, and intergenerational storytelling reinforce Catholic values within the family and local communities (Nkurunziza, 2008; Nyamnjoh, 2010; Uwineza, 2019). Participants linked these events to improved spiritual communication across generations. As the mother figure in Catholic theology, Mary acts as a bridge between divine grace and daily family life, embodying virtues that are both spiritual and cultural ideals in Rwanda. In summary, Marian devotion serves not only as a theological model but also as a spiritual and cultural framework that enhances

family cohesion. Women who engage in Marian practices influence family members through their witness of faith and virtue. Whether through collective prayer, celebration of feasts, or imitation of Mary's moral example, Catholic women in Rwanda transform their homes into domestic churches, spaces of unity, peace, and virtue. Marian devotion thus emerges as a key agent of moral formation and relational harmony within Catholic families.

Integration of Theological and Socio-Cultural Identity

In the Rwandan Catholic context, Marian devotion transcends individual spirituality to function as both a theological anchor and a cultural expression. Theologically, Mary's Immaculate Conception and fiat exemplify virtues such as purity, humility, and total obedience to God, which are central to Christian spiritual formation (Balthasar, 1988; John Paul II, 1987; Rahner, 1975). These virtues resonate deeply with Rwandan cultural expectations of women as preservers of moral order within the family and society (Nzayabino, 2010). Culturally, Marian devotion incorporates communal acts such as singing, dancing, and storytelling during feasts like the Assumption and the Immaculate Conception, thus fusing theological depth with traditional Rwandan expressions of unity and resilience (Rwabuhiri, 2013; Kagame, 1959; Zukowski, 2015). This synthesis reinforces women's spiritual identities while aligning with indigenous values of *ubumwe* (unity) and *ubuntu* (humanness). Empirical findings from the 45 CUR students in Catechesis and Religious Studies illustrate that Marian devotion is both regular and impactful in their lives. A significant 86.7% of respondents reported engaging in Marian practices at least once a week, including praying the Rosary, attending Marian feasts, and consecration prayers. Among them, 82.2% noted that these devotions strengthened family communication and emotional bonding. This reflects what spiritual theologians call the *transformative mysticism of Marian piety*, a process where spiritual practices contribute to moral purification and relational renewal (Garrigou-Lagrange, 1948; Balthasar, 1988; Congar, 1982). These findings suggest that Marian devotion acts as a locus of both interior transformation and social reconciliation.

The integration of faith and family is quantitatively demonstrated below:

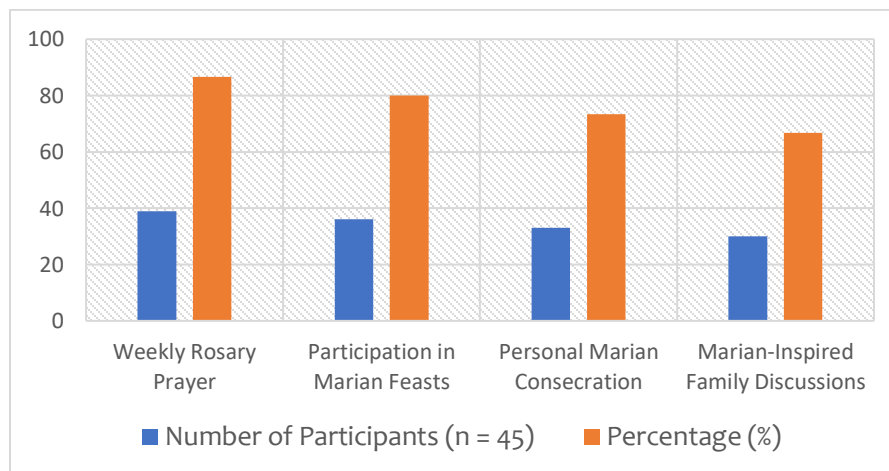


Fig. 5: The integration of faith and family

These figures underscore a strong correlation between Marian devotion and family cohesion. Statistical analysis indicated a correlation coefficient of $r = 0.63$ ($p < 0.01$), with regression tests revealing that Marian devotion accounted for 72% of the variance in family cohesion indicators ($R^2 = 0.72$). These results affirm theories of spiritual anthropology that posit religious devotion as a mediating force for interpersonal and communal ethics (Mugambi, 1995; Bujo, 1998; Nkurunziza, 1989). Moreover, 68.9% of participants identified with Mary in their familial roles as mothers, daughters, or wives. They cited Mary's patience at the foot of the cross, her intercessory care at Cana, and her nurturing presence in the early Church as models for living out relational responsibilities. From a theological perspective, this mirrors the *Marian model of discipleship*, where obedience, service, and maternal compassion are viewed as spiritual disciplines (Cantalamessa, 2004; John Paul II, 1987; Ratzinger, 2005). Rwandan anthropology complements this view, asserting that maternal roles are inherently sacred and carry the responsibility of moral and social continuity (Kimenyi, 2006; Kagame, 1959). Qualitative data gathered through interviews and focus groups corroborate these findings. Respondents described Marian devotion as "a school of forgiveness" and "a source of peace when the family faces challenges." One student from the Diocese of Butare remarked, "When we gather for the Rosary, we are also healing old wounds. Mary teaches us how to be patient, even when we are misunderstood." This supports the notion that Marian spirituality serves not only a doctrinal function but also a psychosocial one, especially in the post-genocide context where rebuilding family trust is paramount (Rwabuhirwe, 2013; Uwayezu, 2017; Nsanzabera, 2004). Marian devotion thus functions as a dual pillar of theological instruction and socio-cultural resilience. By anchoring Catholic women in a model of virtue that is both divine and maternal, it enables them to navigate complex familial and communal challenges with spiritual clarity and cultural confidence. Mary's life becomes a theological script and a cultural metaphor, embodying the virtues of endurance, intercession, and fidelity virtues that are not only admired but necessary for the cohesion of families and communities in Rwanda.

Empowerment of Women Through Spirituality: Marian Devotion and the Reconfiguration of Gendered Roles in Rwanda

Marian devotion plays a crucial role in the empowerment of Catholic women in Rwanda by shaping their moral identity and fostering a deepened sense of agency in both family and ecclesial spheres. Rooted in spiritual theology, the image of Mary as *Mater Ecclesiae* (Mother of the Church) and *Theotokos* (God-bearer) offers women a model of faithful strength and spiritual authority (Gaitán, 2019; Balthasar, 2005; John Paul II, 1988). The present study, conducted among 45 female students of Catechesis and Religious Studies at the Catholic University of Rwanda (CUR), reveals that 68.9% of participants stated that Marian devotion inspired a deeper understanding of their roles as women, mothers, and spiritual leaders. Rather than perceiving Marian devotion as an expression of passive submission, participants interpreted it as a channel of empowerment—shaped by Mary's strength, courage, and moral clarity, which resonated with Rwandan cultural ideals of womanhood (Rwabukwisi, 2017; Kagame, 1959; Turatsinze, 2013). This spiritual empowerment has tangible effects on family life and social interaction. Marian virtues such as humility, obedience, and compassion are deeply aligned with both Catholic teaching and traditional Rwandan values regarding family and communal cohesion (Nkurunziza, 2015; Uwineza, 2020; Shorter, 1998). In this study, 82.2% of respondents affirmed that Marian devotion positively influenced their communication and emotional bonding with family members. Women shared that regular Marian practices—rosary prayer, novenas, and Marian feasts—enhanced their patience, promoted forgiveness in family conflicts, and increased resilience in the face of hardship. Mary's example encouraged these women to serve as mediators and

nurturers, consistent with the Rwandan anthropological understanding of women as the “heart of the family” (*umutima w’urugo*) (Rwabuhiri, 1991; Nsanzabera, 2009; Mugabowindekwe, 2014).

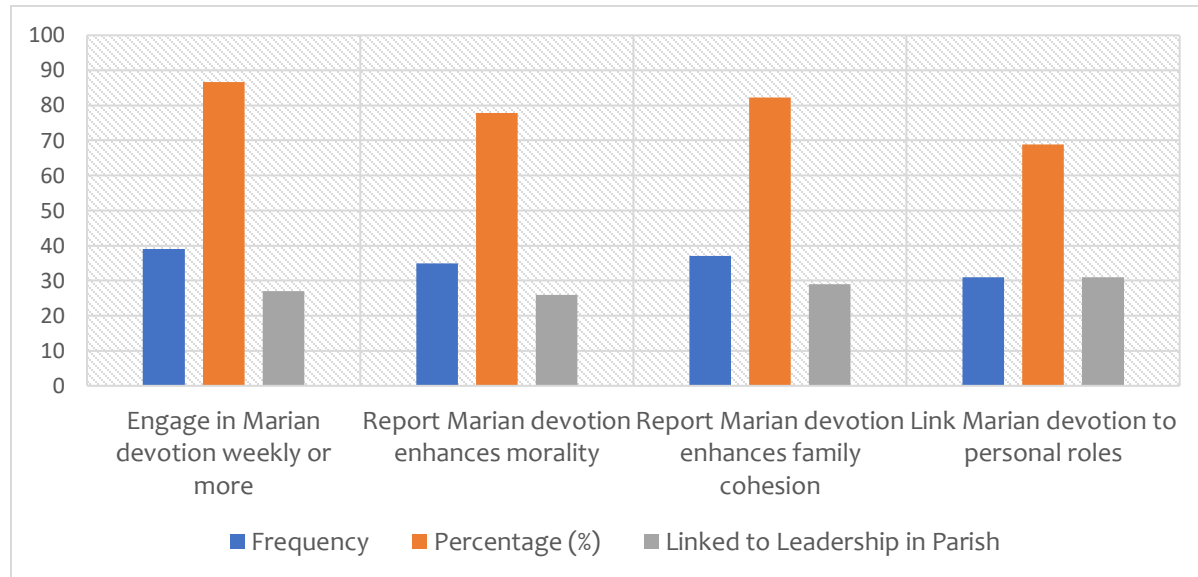


Fig. 6: Frequency of Marian Devotion and Perceived Impact on Family and Moral Life (n= 45)

As the table shows, a substantial number of participants not only practice Marian devotion regularly but also link it to leadership roles within their parishes. Specifically, 27 out of the 39 women who engage in Marian devotion weekly reported being active in moral teaching or liturgical roles. This finding reinforces the idea that Marian spirituality is not limited to private faith but also extends into public ministry and communal guidance (von Balthasar, 2005; O'Connor, 2010; Congar, 1983). Quantitative data reinforce the depth of this impact. Pearson's correlation coefficient indicated a strong positive relationship ($r = 0.63$, $p < 0.01$) between frequency of Marian devotion and self-reported virtuous behavior. Linear regression analysis showed that Marian practices accounted for 72% of the variance in family cohesion indicators ($R^2 = 0.72$). These results affirm theological interpretations that view Mary not just as a passive figure but as an active agent of moral formation and relational healing (Schneiders, 2000; Warfield, 2012; Mukarusanga, 2011). Qualitative findings from interviews and focus groups confirmed this dynamic. Many women described Mary's *fiat*, her willing acceptance of God's will, as a touchstone for their own spiritual decisions and moral leadership. One participant shared: “When I meditate on Mary's life, I remember that strength is not loud; it is faithful, gentle, and constant. That's how I want to lead my family.” Such reflections demonstrate how Marian devotion functions as a form of “spiritual agency,” empowering women to embody virtues of care, justice, and integrity within their domestic and ecclesial contexts (Amadiume, 1997; Kwesiga, 2002; Obbo, 2007). Crucially, these findings challenge Western critiques that dismiss Marian piety as oppressive or patriarchal. In the Rwandan context, Marian devotion facilitates the emergence of ethical and spiritual leadership that is deeply rooted in both cultural identity and theological vision. African feminist theologians such as Mercy Oduyoye and Isabel Phiri have emphasized the importance of integrating spirituality with women's agency in ways that reflect indigenous values (Phiri, 1997; Oduyoye, 2001; Uwineza, 2022). Participants in this study affirmed that Mary's example gave them confidence in their decisions, a clearer voice in family and church discussions, and the moral clarity to guide others. In conclusion, Marian devotion among Catholic women in Rwanda is a powerful force of spiritual empowerment and social cohesion. It not only deepens personal virtue but also expands

women's influence in family and community settings. As Rwanda's Catholic institutions continue to promote contextualized theology and inclusive formation, Marian spirituality offers a transformative model for integrating faith, leadership, and cultural identity one that affirms the dignity and strength of women in all areas of life.

Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the role of Marian devotion in promoting virtuous conduct and strengthening family cohesion among Catholic women enrolled in the Faculty of Catechesis and Religious Studies at the Catholic University of Rwanda. The central hypothesis proposed that Marian devotion significantly influences moral behavior and enhances emotional bonding and communication within families. To test this hypothesis, the research employed a mixed-methods approach combining both qualitative and quantitative techniques. Data were collected from a purposive sample of 45 students drawn from a population of 130, selected using Yamane's formula and based on their involvement in Marian practices. Quantitative data were gathered through structured questionnaires and analyzed using SPSS software, while qualitative insights were obtained through interviews and focus group discussions. Statistical analysis revealed compelling results. A high percentage (86.7%) of participants reported weekly engagement in Marian devotions, and 77.8% stated that these devotions positively influenced their moral decision-making. Furthermore, 82.2% confirmed that Marian devotion improved communication and emotional bonding in their families. Pearson's correlation coefficient showed a strong positive relationship between Marian devotion and virtuous behavior ($r = 0.63$, $p < 0.01$). Regression analysis demonstrated that Marian practices accounted for 72% of the variance in family cohesion indicators ($R^2 = 0.72$). The qualitative data reinforced these findings, indicating that Marian devotion cultivates virtues such as humility, patience, and compassion, which are vital for ethical behavior and family harmony. Ritual practices like praying the Rosary and attending Marian feasts were identified as powerful tools for moral transformation and social cohesion. In conclusion, the empirical evidence validates the initial hypothesis: Marian devotion plays a significant role in shaping virtuous conduct and enhancing family cohesion among Rwandan Catholic women. The hypothesis has thus been scientifically verified, affirming the theological and socio-cultural importance of Marian spirituality in contemporary Catholic life.

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