

# Mary's Heart

## Our Back Door to Heaven

Dear Friends of the Heart of Christ,

Most of us have heard of the very popular book *Heaven is for Real* and the movie that followed it. Our community was given a copy of the book and eventually read it in our refectory. It was an amazing story of a small boy who died, had an after-life experience and temporarily went to heaven. He eventually revived after a short time and told his story with the help of his father who is a minister in a Christian church. Not only has this book caught the imagination of many—because we all must die and face the great unknown on the other side—but there are now a plethora of books in print that tell the stories of people who have had near-death experiences and have written about them. One that recently captured my attention was by a medical doctor Mary C. Neal, M.D. who wrote a book entitled *To Heaven and Back*. The author of this book has quite an impressive resume. She is an orthopedic surgeon, besides being the mother of four children and a happily married Christian wife. In 1999, she was vacationing with her husband in South America and while boating, she was pinned underwater in a kayak and drowned. She writes, “I died and went to heaven. After a brief stay, I was returned to my body...” It was six months before her injuries healed and she was able to return to her medical practice, but as a changed woman. Before, though she was a believing Christian, her work and family left little time for God. Afterward her near-death experience, which profoundly transformed her in both spiritual and religious ways, led her to an unshakable belief that there is life after death. Now, she assures us, she does not fear death and that everyday really matters to her because she must be about God's business. Returning to earthly life, she felt a compulsion to tell her story and to help others find their way back to God. Reading about this woman's experiences left me with the sense of her real sincerity and the overall veracity of her story. There, I think, is much to learn here. Before her near-death experience, she tells us she believed in God and tried to be a good and moral person, yet her faith was not integrated into her daily life. But after her near-death experience, the reality of eternal life became a part of her every breath. Her own words express it best, “I am in constant prayer and regardless of what I am doing, I try to reflect God's love and live for His glory. I try not to miss opportunities to uplift or encourage the spiritual life of others, and I live with gratitude and joy, knowing that I never face challenges alone.”

This woman's experiences vastly revitalized her spiritual life. Stories like this can help us overcome our fears of what the after-life will be like. From the more familiar source of Saint Faustina's *Diary* we can read similar experiences. Faustina writes: “When I was ...to replace one of the Sisters for a short time, I went across the garden one afternoon and stopped on the shore of the lake; I stood there for a long time, contemplating my surroundings. Suddenly I saw the Lord near me, and He graciously said to me, ‘All this I created for you ...and know that all this beauty is nothing compared to what I have prepared for you in eternity.’” (Diary 158) Faustina also records in her *Diary* her account of her visit to heaven: “November 27, 1936. Today I was in heaven, in spirit, and I saw its inconceivable beauties and the happiness that awaits us after death. I saw how all creatures give ceaseless praise and glory to God... Now I understand Saint Paul, who said, ‘Eye has not seen, nor has ear heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man what God has prepared for those who love him.’ And God has given me to understand that there is but one thing that is of infinite value in His eyes, and that is love of God; love, love and once again, love; and nothing can compare with a single act of pure love of God... Oh, with what inconceivable favors God gifts a soul that loves Him sincerely! Oh, how happy is the soul who already here on earth enjoys His special favors! And of such are the little and humble souls. The sight of this great majesty of God, which I came to understand more profoundly... did not cause my soul to be stricken with terror or fear; no, no, not at all! My soul was filled with peace and love, and the more I come to know the greatness of God, the more joyful I become that He is as He is. And I rejoice immensely in His greatness and am delighted that I am so little because, since I am little, He carries me in His arms and holds me close to His Heart. O my God, how I pity those people who do not believe in eternal life; how I pray for them that a ray of mercy would envelop them too, and that God would clasp them to His fatherly bosom...” (Diary 777)

As Catholics who believe in the intercession of the saints and particularly of the Blessed Virgin Mary, we know that these heavenly friends are ever ready to help us along our spiritual way. They are rooting for us to reach heaven. They are not substituting for the Lord Jesus, but are his heavenly helpers, leading us to His Sacred Heart. Can God dispense with their intercession? Certainly. Does God want to? It doesn't seem that way because God gives to his holy ones, especially to his Blessed Mother, divine graces, that is, special spiritual gifts and enables his saints to distribute them accordingly.

From our own Catholic heritage we know that there are numerous saints and seers who have experienced the glories of heaven. Many of us have read about the Marian apparitions at Fatima, Lourdes and present day Medjugorje (still being investigated by the Church) where the seers basked in the heavenly light of the Blessed Virgin Mary. They all acknowledged that no words could capture the beauty of heaven, represented by the beauty of Heaven's Queen. They tell us that if we only knew what awaits us in heaven, there would be no difficulties or trials in our lives that would not be worth the bliss of God's heavenly kingdom.

Recently I came across an article about the six visionaries of Medjugorje who have all had the privilege of seeing heaven in one way or another. One of them, Vicka, described her heavenly experience as initially being confronted with a great closed door. When she arrived at heaven's threshold, it was the Blessed Virgin Mary who opened the door for Vicka to enter. I found this imagery very interesting because the ancient Litany of Loreto invokes Mary as "the Gate of Heaven." Blessed John Henry Newman relates that this title is given to Mary because it was through her that our Lord passed from heaven to earth. But just as our Lord came to us through Mary, we go to Him through her. Or as St. Louis de Montfort so aptly puts it, "To Jesus, through Mary." Appropriately we can conclude: through the Heart of Mary, then to the Heart of Jesus (because through their Hearts, we honor their entire beings).

So let us not hesitate to love and venerate the Heart of Mary. Her heart always, *always* leads us to Jesus' Heart. And to honor the Heart of Mary is very pleasing to the Heart of Jesus. Two biblical passages come to my mind as I write this: 1) As Jesus was hanging on the cross, one of his final acts before he died was to give his mother to St. John the Evangelist. Recall the words Jesus spoke: "Woman, behold your son!" Then Jesus said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" (Jn 19:26-27) Jesus was giving to John, who was representing us all, Mary as his/our spiritual Mother. This elevated dimension of Mary's relationship to humanity is clearly seen in many Marian apparitions, but especially in Our Lady of Guadalupe. Whether we know it or not, whether we like it or not, Mary is our Mother who loves us and wants every good for us. 2) In the Gospel passage of the wedding at Cana (John 2:1-11) we find a wonderful example of Mary's intercession with her son. Mary asks Jesus for a simple favor: there is no wine for the wedding guests. Can he do something? Even though Jesus seems reluctant at first, replying, "Woman, how does your concern affect me? My hour has not yet come," he will not disregard his mother's request. The result: the finest wine possible! The Heart of Mary is a potent intercessor before her Son. [Now I realize that our Protestant friends feel disinclined to accept these ideas, because they say we are worshipping Mary, and they go straight to Jesus. Catholics do not worship Mary (or any of the saints for that matter). We honor Mary and with our Orthodox brethren believe in her great intercessory power.]

The Heart of Mary is all love, since it is the perfect reproduction of the Heart of Jesus. It is therefore goodness itself. Mary is our Mother and loves each of us, without exception, however guilty we may be. She is rightly called the Mother of Mercy and particularly known as the Refuge of Sinners—another title given her in the Litany of Loreto. Mary loves us in spite of our unworthiness. Therefore we can have unbounded trust in the kindness, love and power of the Heart of Mary. We can have recourse to her in all our trials and anxieties and troubles. We can call upon her in particular to obtain the conversion of sinners or the conversions of those near and dear to us.

There are two stories that I would like to share with you that are poignant indications of Mary's special regard for sinners. The first one involves the Italian mystic St. Gemma Galgani who died at age 25 in 1903. St. Gemma had an extremely intense prayer life and a special love for souls whom she wanted to save at any cost to herself. She frequently fell into ecstasy and these were witnessed by various people. This particular one was recorded by a priest who was an expert in mystical theology and eventually wrote her biography. He was ordered by his provincial superior to examine the mystic and met her in the house where she lived. While there Gemma had an ecstasy, the subject of which was the conversion of a hardened sinner that took the form of a wrestling match between her and the Divine Justice. After numerous petitions to the Lord to save the sinner, the Lord finally showed the saint the man's shocking evil deeds. Gemma could only acknowledge his terrible transgressions, but finally made this appeal to the Lord: "Look, I present you another advocate for my sinner. It is your Mother who asks you to forgive him. See! Oh, imagine saying no to your Mother. Surely you cannot say no to her. And now answer me, Jesus, tell me that you will save my sinner." The victory was won. Everything changed as the Lord Jesus granted this grace.

The second true story is about the miraculous intercession of the Virgin Mary to a prisoner on death row, Claude Newman of Mississippi. Newman, born in 1923, was convicted for the murder of Sid Cook. Cook, who had married Newman's grandmother, was terribly abusive to her. Claude, deeply angered by such ill treatment of his devoted grandmother, sought to get even with Cook. One day he hid and shot the man, killing him and then fleeing the scene. Apprehended some weeks later, Claude was found guilty by jury and sentenced to die in the electric chair. While in jail awaiting execution, Claude shared a cell-block with four other prisoners. One night as the five were talking, Claude noticed a medal on a string around the neck of another prisoner. Whatever Claude said to him, angered this man, and he suddenly took off the medal and threw it at Claude's feet, telling him to "take the thing." Claude placed it around his neck, with no idea whose image was on it. It was simply a trinket and something shiny to wear. That night while sleeping on his cot, a beautiful lady appeared to him telling him, "If you would like me to be your Mother and you would like to be my child, send for a priest of the Catholic Church." This Claude did and eventually was baptized and received into the Catholic Church. The beautiful lady was, of course, the Blessed Virgin Mary who appeared to Claude several times before his execution and taught him heavenly lessons. Claude longed to go to heaven and was deeply distressed when his execution date was postponed. He was advised by his spiritual director to offer the delay for the conversion of another hardened criminal in the prison. Claude agreed. During his two week reprieve, Claude offered his sacrifices and prayers for his fellow prisoner who hated God and everything spiritual. Three months later after Claude had died, this criminal's execution arrived. He blasphemed God and then suddenly stopped speaking, his eyes fixed on a corner of the room. Screaming, he turned to the sheriff and said, "Get me a priest!" The man made a complete turnaround. When asked what changed his mind he said he had a vision of the Blessed Virgin Mary standing behind the black man Claude and then saw his destined place in hell which instantly converted his soul in the last moments of his life. He died a repentant man. Let us never underestimate the power and loving intercession of Our Blessed Mother. May her Immaculate Heart, so united with the Sacred Heart of Jesus, intercede for us now in all our concerns and bring us to heaven, our true home. +

*This talk on Sacred Heart spirituality was given in our Gathering Room on May 3rd, 2015. If you would like to attend similar presentations by the sisters, our next talk will be held on Sunday, June 7th, 2015 at 4:00 p.m.*