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OUR JOURNEY TO THE HEART OF JESUS

Dear Friends of the Heart of Christ,

We have often heard of the account in John's Gospel (8:1-11) of the woman caught in adultery. As the stone-throwing crowd gathered around the guilty woman, Jesus declared, "He who is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone." The response to this challenge by the Lord was that the crowd, ready to fling their stones at this woman, melted away. The Gospel tells us that Jesus did not condemn the woman. Yet, he did not condone her sin either. In fact he said, "Go on your way and sin no more." Jesus unequivocally recognized that what the woman had done was indeed a transgression of God's law, and his final words directed her to terminate this life of sin. From this Gospel passage we can readily contemplate the mercy and justice of Jesus. One cannot be separated from the other. In another account familiar to most of us—this time from the *Diary of St. Faustina*— we can read about her visit with her guardian angel to a place of purification of souls we call purgatory. Faustina informs us that she was taken to a misty place full of fire in which there was a great crowd of suffering souls. They were praying fervently, but to no avail for themselves. We on earth can come to their aid, lessening their torments by our prayers and sacrifices. Upon leaving this "prison of suffering," Faustina tells us that she heard an interior voice say to her, "My mercy does not want this, but my justice demands it." Clearly, God's mercy and justice are intricately linked to each other.

The Heart of Jesus, so loving and merciful, wants us to be with him forever. Yes, this Almighty creator and ruler of everything in existence, who is goodness itself, desires to share his heavenly treasures with us. But to partake of this Kingdom, we must be totally freed from all selfishness, from all attachments to earthly riches and affections and to long for Him. How many of us can honestly say that we fit into this category? That is why it is so necessary that we be purified, either in this life or the next, before we can inherit the all-holy, never-ending and unimaginably blissful Kingdom of God.

All of us need to be purified... even the saints. A look at the final days of St. Claude la Colombière gives us some insights into this very fact. St. Claude, as you may recall, was the foremost spiritual director of St. Margaret Mary. He was the one whom the Lord referred to as his "faithful servant and perfect friend" when Jesus interiorly repeated these words to St. Margaret Mary. He ratified and encouraged his saintly penitent to follow the inspirations and messages she received from the Sacred Heart, recognizing them as authentic revelations. St. Claude, immediately after his twenty month stint in Paray-le-Monial (the little French town where St. Margaret Mary lived), was sent to London where he became the chaplain to the Duchess of York. England was by that time entrenched in the Protestant Reformation, and Claude, a devoted disciple of the Sacred Heart, was very restricted in his apostolate. Informers had a lucrative means of relieving their financial burdens by reporting any Catholic activity to the government. In a letter, Claude explains that he "was accused by a young man... whom I thought I had converted and whom I had supported for the space of three months or so after his feigned conversion." Thrown into one of England's worst prisons, his already frail health rapidly deteriorated. He was ultimately released by an intervention from the French government and returned to his homeland a broken man physically. He had a little over two years to live. Claude knew his time was short and he wanted to use it to purify himself from the temptations to vainglory that lure many a disciple. He recorded in his retreat notes, "Make me holy, dear God, and do not spare me in making me good; for I wish to become so, no matter what the cost." Writing to St. Margaret Mary he confesses, "I am not able to acquire that forgetfulness of self which should give me entrance into the Heart of Jesus Christ."

Although St. Claude had not desired sickness, he fully accepted it as the will of God. Arriving at Paray-le-Monial in August, 1681, he was in a state of great weakness, not even able to dress himself. Around the Feast of All Saint's Day (1681) he had a conversation with St. Margaret Mary. He writes of this meeting: "Our Lord told her that if I were well, I would glorify Him by my zeal, but as I am ill, He glorifies Himself in me." In his suffering, Claude was being purified and at the same time was giving glory to God. In the first days of 1682, the sick

man had no illusions about his recovery and became "quite convinced" that he would not get well in Paray. He could barely breathe and was hoping to find relief in more favorable weather conditions. His departure was set for the Feast of St. Francis de Sales (celebrated on January 29th at that time). Apprised of these plans, St. Margaret Mary sent him a small note telling him not to leave, if he could do so without disregarding the orders he had received, because "the Lord has requested the sacrifice of your life in Paray." On the evening of February 15, he died, after a violent attack of fever and hemorrhaging. At 5:00 the next morning, Catherine Bisefranc, a mutual friend of the two saints, came to tell Margaret Mary of the death of Claude. Her response was, "Pray and have prayers said for the repose of his soul." But later in the day, she wrote to Catherine, "Don't grieve anymore. Pray to him. Fear nothing; he is more powerful to help you now than ever."

Eight years later, revealing details of what actually happened came to light when Margaret Mary's former superior was asked for her recollections after the saintly sister's death. Mother Greyfié related: "When the Rev. Father de la Colombière died, this dear sister lost in him the best friend she had in the world... But I took notice that she did not ask me permission to do for him as she did for others in the way of extraordinary prayers and penances and I asked her why. She answered me with a sweet and satisfied air: 'My dear Mother, he has no need of them. He is in a condition to pray to God for us, being placed in heaven by the goodness and mercy of the Sacred Heart of our Lord Jesus Christ. Only to satisfy for some negligence which remained to him in the exercise of divine love, his soul was kept from seeing God from the time it left his body to the time the body was laid in the grave.'"

During the month of November, the Church reminds us that we must all pass through that gateway of leaving our mortal bodies behind and enter into a new realm of eternal being. For the majority of us who have not lived faithfully and who have failed at one time or another to correspond with God's precepts and inspirations, we must be purified. Here is how St. Faustina described her experience of this in her *Diary* (36):

*Once I was summoned to the judgment seat of God. I stood alone before the Lord... Suddenly I saw the complete condition of my soul as God sees it. I could clearly see all that is displeasing to God. I did not know that even the smallest transgressions will have to be accounted for. What a moment! Who can describe it? To stand before the Thrice-Holy God! Jesus asked me, "Who are you?" I answered, "I am your servant, Lord." "You are guilty of one day of fire in purgatory." I wanted to throw myself immediately into the flames of purgatory, but Jesus stopped me and said, "Which do you prefer, suffer now for one day of purgatory or for a short while on earth." I replied, "Jesus, I want to suffer in purgatory, and I want to suffer also the greatest pains on earth, even if it were until the end of the world." Jesus said, "One of the two is enough; you will go back to earth, and there you will suffer much, but not for long; you will accomplish my will and my desires... Now, rest your head on my heart, and draw from it strength and power for these sufferings..."*

A few weeks ago, one of our friends sent us a book entitled *Heaven is Beautiful: How Dying Taught Me That Death Is Just the Beginning*—another story of a young man who had a near-death experience. One recreation day, a Sister and I took the book out on our library porch and randomly read out a section of it. The pages we read delineated some experiences that a young man, in his twenties, had after his near-death experience. He related a terrible car accident that he was in. Sleeping in the front seat of his friend's car as they were traveling on a busy highway, he woke up and reached out jerking the steering wheel as his friend was driving. This unintentional action veered the vehicle into the side of a nearby eighteen wheeler. Instantaneous crashing, crunching and shattering of glass ensued. Miraculously, no one was seriously hurt, but the car was damaged beyond repair. His friend was extremely upset because he had been warned by his father before the trip not to get in any accidents. Now, with limited money and no car, they were in dire straits. His friend ultimately took a bus home and expressed his frustration by saying that he did not want to see him again. The young man who had had the near-death experience donated the cash he had to his friend and decided to hitchhike home. As the scenario is played out, this young man begins to reminisce about his near-death experience and the peace and trouble-free calm he felt on the "other-side." Why, he asks himself, did he ever agree to come back to earth and live in this mess?

And what was he missing on the other side? A small story from the book *The Scent of Holiness* (by Constantina Palmer) may give us a hint. This story, I believe, is an interesting illustration of how our earthly pains can purify us for God's wonderful surprises. Told by a young Greek Orthodox woman, Constantina relates that one day she and another nun of the monastery where she was making a retreat were preparing some jam and pickled vegetables. As they were packing up these items, a man from the village came to speak to one of the nuns. After he left, Sr. Xenia said to her, "Did you see that young man? He was married to a young woman, but she died of cancer when she was only twenty-nine. They hadn't been married for very long when she was diagnosed. She was a good Christian and never complained or asked why she had to have cancer. She accepted God's will. One night he dreamt about her. She was in a magnificent palace with large beautiful grounds. When he saw her there, he asked her 'How are you? Where do you live?' 'I live here and I am very happy,' she said. 'What is this place?' he asked. 'It's the place God has prepared for those martyred by cancer. He allowed me to come here because I never asked him, why me, when I was ill but accepted his will,' she said."

The Sacred Heart of Jesus loves all souls dearly and wants us all near him for eternity. Because we are weak and frail human beings who so easily fall for the ways of the world, we must be purified to inherit God's Kingdom. This should motivate us to pray for our dear ones who have gone before us. A heartfelt message left by a holy soul tells it all: "I know when you pray for me, and it is the same with all the other souls here in purgatory. Very few of us here get any prayers. The majority of us are totally abandoned with no thought or prayers offered for us from those on earth." May our hearts be moved to remember the Holy Souls in our prayers and sacrifices, so that they can quickly reach their goal of the Heart of Jesus. They will never forget to repay us. +

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*This talk on Sacred Heart spirituality was given in our Gathering Room on November 1st, 2015. If you would like to attend similar presentations by the Sisters, our next talk will be held on Sunday, December 6th, 2015 at 4:00 p.m.*