

THE SACRED HEART: A NURTURING HEART

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Dear Friends of the Heart of Christ

The many artistic images we see of the Sacred Heart are attempts to bring Our Lord closer to us on a human level, leading us ultimately to the Divine. Each artistic period and culture has attempted to depict the heart of Christ with depth and in a pleasing manner. Most likely the image that speaks to our individual hearts is one we have known from our very early years. Seeing it is comforting and familiar, maybe even reminding us of early prayer experiences with family or in church. In recent years, the eastern icons have become more popular, rendering a more symbolic image following strict rules of color, position, and style. But whichever image “speaks” to us, it acts to nurture and focus our devotion.

Who was this man in his human form? How did he become the teacher of the Kingdom? Obvious to us, he is the Lord. But in his human life, he needed to learn the basics of life like all of us from his mother and foster father. We really do not know what Our Lord or Our Lady really looked like. What we have in the gospels is a description of the actions of a man and a woman who lived in a particular place and time, but who now live eternally.

The fact that Jesus lived our life helps us realize his existence as true man. The heart of Christ began as the heart of an infant. As Christ desires our love now, he once was taught about human love by Mary and Joseph. The Lord’s ability to reach out on a human level to all those he met he learned from living his humble life with his saintly parents.

As we deepen our devotion to the Sacred Heart, we encounter Jesus’ human heart so beautifully when we link it to the heart of his mother, Mary. It is appropriate in this month of May—Mary’s month, and the month of honoring our own mothers—that we look at the Sacred Heart from Mary’s perspective.

At the very Incarnation of our Lord, Mary’s heart was open to the message of the angel and therefore was obedient to God. We are told that she was initially fearful, then acquiesced: “Be it done unto me according to your word.” We see at the end of our Lord’s life, “Not my will but thine be done.” Between these two statements of utter openness to God’s will we see the life of our Lord as it is given, moment by moment back to the Father.

Motherhood far transcends the biological level. Mary gave Jesus his humanity: through Mary, Jesus was enabled to become the incarnation of divine love. Mary taught him to love. Before Mary became Jesus' disciple, Jesus was first the disciple of Mary.

We can imagine in all of the hidden moments of our Lord's youth and early manhood, the learning of his prayers, his work, his care of his parents, his activities surrounding his village and his extended family a natural development of one who was known and accepted. "How can this be? Isn't this the carpenter's son?" Yet, there must have been those special daily moments when the exceptional Mother guided and taught the child; the moments of compassion for the sick; the moments of frustration and anger that had to be smoothed over; the moments of pain and confusion when others were not so kind.

In the film "The Passion of the Christ", there is a touching scene during the way of the cross, while Mary follows on the sidelines, attempting to be with her son at every step. He suddenly stumbles and falls. There is a flashback to his childhood, and we see Mary rushing to pick up the bewildered child who has tripped and fallen. In that one scene, we can imagine their days together, with the mother always attentive, wanting to keep him from harm. Yet, on this tortuous path to Golgotha, there is nothing that she can do but travel beside him. Mary's "yes" was the acceptance of her calling and mission. It was the expression of her commitment to be Jesus' Mother. And as Jesus' life unfolded, her commitment continued to grow, for at first it was far from clear what was involved. It was Mary's privilege and joy to discover the perfection of Jesus' heart: his gracious love, his obedience, his growing awareness of the Father, his awakening passion for the Kingdom of his Father. And when the time came for Jesus to start his public life, our Lady was ready; by then she understood that he had to be concerned with the things of his Father.

In the first public miracle our Lord performed, it was his mother who noticed the lack of wine and then asked that he respond to the need. Hesitant, our Lord said: "My hour has not yet come." But Mary confidently told the wine steward, "Do whatever he tells you." Obediently, our Lord has the many tall jars filled—more than enough—and the best. He will always respond with great generosity and love!

This great respect and obedience that he shows his mother, he has learned to show other women he meets. In a restricted society where women were not expected to speak in public or to a stranger, our Lord even sets up a situation with the woman at the well by asking for a drink of water. In the exchange with the Samaritan woman, our Lord already knows her need and finds a way to make her realize just what it is she needs. Ever the teacher, our Lord draws out the "right answers" from his "pupil", thus making the lesson more meaningful.

Even with the woman caught in adultery, our Lord sees beyond the act to the soul of a woman who has loved wrongly but whose soul is still precious to the Father. As our Lord writes with his

finger in the sand, we imagine he may be revealing the sins of the accusers as well. Are we not all equal in the sight of God? Does the Father not love all of us, sinners as well as the virtuous? We can imagine perhaps Mary teaching the young Jesus not to think ill of others; not to listen to the gossip that can spread so quickly in a small town; but to always remember the love of his Father in heaven.

On two occasions it is recorded that while Jesus was teaching the people, someone called out that his mother and family members were there to see him. So often we have heard interpretations of our Lord's reaction. I like to think that, in the midst of relating a parable, our Lord, the consummate teacher, kept the minds of the people on his lesson by responding: "Who are my mother and my brothers? Those who do the will of my Father in heaven, these are my mother and my brothers." His family life was personal; his public life was always focused on leading the people to the Father.

As Mary stands at the foot of the cross, remaining with her son through his final agonizing hours, she experiences his final gift of loving care: "When Jesus, therefore, saw his mother and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he said to his mother, 'Woman, behold thy son.' Then he said to the disciple, 'Behold thy mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his home."

Finally, we see Mary in the Cenacle at Pentecost, joining the apostles in prayer. Here we see her in action as Mother of the Church, helping to bring to life the Church by obtaining the gift of the Spirit, of which the Heart of her son is the Source. She remains associated with the mystery of Jesus' Heart, obtaining for all disciples the gift of faith in her Son, the gift of love, for she obtains for them Jesus' paschal gift of the Spirit. She is the true woman at the well, able to draw living water, to renew our hearts. Her closeness to her Son enables her to lead us to the source.

As our Lord offers us his human heart in the images of the Sacred Heart, we are aware of how it has been formed by loving parents as well as by our eternal Father in heaven. When we honor his most Sacred Heart in prayers of praise and of reparation, we are also honoring the Mother, the foster father, and our Eternal Father for all the gifts and graces that have been bestowed upon us and upon the world through this most Sacred Heart of Jesus.