



PRAYER THAT TOUCHES THE HEART OF GOD

by Visitation Sister

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Dear Friends of the Heart of Christ,

Did you ever persistently have a thought or image that keeps coming back to your mind? I'd like to share one of these with you that has been in the photographic replay of my mind. It has its origin from a picture I recently saw in a popular religious magazine. The large photo in black and white showed a group of military men in uniform. They were young guys with strong bodies. Nice-looking. But what caught my attention was what they were doing. They were praying. Their attitudes were one of humble supplication. Most had their heads bowed or eyes closed. Some were hunched over and gave the impression that they were pouring out their hearts to their Creator. Perhaps they were praying before they were led into battle or a dangerous life-threatening encounter. Whatever was pending or whatever their chaplain may have said, the response of these young people was one of utmost, sincere, heart-rending prayer. No one looked distracted or bored. There was an intensity that emanated from that photo and said to you that this was important, real and something that demanded your all.

Thinking about this, I'd like to take some time to consider how prayer can touch the Heart of Jesus and to look at some examples of great pray-ers.

One of the first dispositions that we need to cultivate in our prayer that touches the Heart of God is a spirit of leaning. What is this spirit of leaning? People who live without God do not even want to consider having to ask God's help for anything. They want to be on their own and to exercise a total independence from a Supreme Being. In our culture today people of this sort do all kinds of things that spurn the mere thought of God or even make a reference to God. Such is the case in the recent trend originating in Sweden and spreading throughout other countries of a brand of anti-Christian jeans known as Cheap Monday Jeans. The designer categorically states that his logos on each pair—a skull with a cross turned upside down on its forehead—is an active statement against Christianity. He insists that his design is to make young people question Christianity since he does not believe in God or the devil. We see this type of anti-God paraphernalia quite often in our world today. This definitely is not an attitude of spiritual leaning. To lean on the Heart of Christ means to depend on his massive power and in his infinite mercy and to follow the heart of God's law. This twofold response by us involves first of all an interior disposition of throwing our cares and concerns into God's lap. Humanly, we can experience a sense of helplessness and may even get a queasy feeling in the pit of our stomachs as we wonder what will happen to us next. Nevertheless, we consciously and



purposefully lean on God and wait on God, believing that the Heart of Jesus is there for us and will not fail us.

The second part of learning to lean on the Lord entails that we follow the heart of God's law, that is, we actively try to live in accordance with God's law and the spirit of God's law. The Sacred Heart of Jesus is not interested in merely lip-service prayers or automated actions that serve our interests more than his interests. What the Heart of Jesus is most concerned about is love-selfless and pure. The Church reminds us of this very poignantly as she prepares us for the season of Lent which is really a season of spiritual renewal. To initiate this season, the Liturgy of the Hours for Ash Wednesday opens with a reading from Isaiah 58:1-12. This familiar text reminds us that God is not enthralled over mere abstinence from food while his laws are being abandoned. The people ask God, "Why do we fast (and we could just as easily add or substitute the word pray) and you do not see it? Afflict ourselves, and you do not take note of it?" The Lord retorts that on our fast day we carry out our own pursuits, quarrel, fight, act unjustly. He admonishes us that if we want light and healing then we need to free the oppressed, eliminate false accusations and maliciousness from our speech, share our food with the hungry, help the homeless and unfortunate and not turn our back on our own.

Now as I was contemplating a good example of the spirit of leaning I came across two significant stories. One was an article about a Father Paul Dent, S.J. Not a candidate, as far as I know, of official sainthood, Father Dent's life, nevertheless, reflects a waiting on the Lord. A devotee of the Sacred Heart, Father joined the Jesuits in 1920 at age 19 because he felt called to the missions of India where he was ultimately ordained. But not long afterward he was diagnosed with a brain disorder that resulted in epileptic seizures. He was sent back to the U.S. with a "get well and come back soon" request from those he served. Surgery was not altogether successful and Father Paul was told to remain in Chicago for further observation. This he did and after a year reapplied to the India missions. A denial came for reasons of health. But the yearning to return to India was very strong within the priest and he reapplied the following year and again the next year. This went on for over 30 years! Undeterred, Father Paul waited until finally he was reassigned to Nepal and to work in India where he died in 1980. Here was a soul entirely given to depending and waiting on the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Constantly he prayed, "Lord Jesus, I love you with all my heart." His prayer touched the Heart of God.

Another story of a family named McCloud is a marvelous example of what it means to follow the spirit of God's law. Made up of five children aged 10-17 and a rugged father and a petite mother, an ordinary day changed the course of this family's existence. One summer day as Pixie McCloud was backing down the driveway in her car she noticed their newspaper on the ground. Stopping the car, she opened the door and stretched out to try and pick up the paper. In the process her foot slipped and hit the gas pedal. The car bolted backwards and her head bashed against the telephone pole.



Screaming for help, Pixie's daughter who was also in the car alerted her father who immediately called 911 for an ambulance. For several weeks Mrs. McCloud was in a coma. Her recovery was very slow and left her right side paralyzed and her speech distorted. After extensive therapy she eventually returned home to her anxious family.

Unfortunately her stay at home was short-lived. A massive stroke left her without all motor control, unable to speak and wheelchair bound. It was recommended that she be placed in a rest home, but Mr. McCloud refused and against all medical advice brought his wife home. Pixie could do nothing for herself. He organized his family and mandated that everyone in the house learn to care for their mother. From henceforth in a family of pre-teens and teenagers, there would be no more swearing, arguing, fighting and any other inappropriate behavior. Mr. McCloud was determined that Pixie's life be as good as possible. With remarkable dedication the family came together to do this with all their hearts. Cooking, cleaning, bathing Mrs. McCloud and even reading to her became natural to her children. They all included their mother in conversations even though she never spoke or acknowledged their presence. Her devoted husband after a hard day of working would return home, clean up and go straight to wherever Pixie was. Carrying her to the rocker he would sit and whisper into her ear how beautiful she was and how much he loved her. Day after day they would do this until Pixie finally died a year later, peacefully in her sleep. This is what it means to follow the heart of God's law of love and their prayer certainly touched God's heart.

So we have seen that the first disposition we need to cultivate in a prayer that touches God's heart is a spirit of leaning-exemplified by an interior dependence and waiting on the Lord and an exterior commitment to live according to the spirit of God's laws.

The second disposition needed to cultivate our prayer that touches God's heart is perseverance. We all know the story in the gospel (Luke 11:5-13) of the persistent man who keeps knocking at his neighbor's door in the middle of the night for a loan of three loaves of bread. The gospel tells us that if the neighbor will not get out of bed to give the man what he wants because of friendship, he will do it because of his neighbor's persistence. Then Jesus likens this situation to our prayer by telling us to keep knocking on heaven's door and don't stop asking until our request is granted-provided, of course, we are asking according to God's ordained will. Over the years I have witnessed this very important aspect of prayer accomplish some amazing results. Perseverance seems to open up the Heart of God and graces begin to flow.

When I think of this virtue of perseverance in prayer, the example of the recently beatified hermit Charles de Foucauld comes to mind. Blessed Charles, just beatified on November 13, 2005, is often pictured as an ascetic looking man in a white habit with a red heart topped by a cross, on front. Seeing his picture, one is drawn to his eyes that seem to emanate an inner light and profound tranquility. Viscount Charles de Foucauld was born to a very aristocratic family in France in 1858.



Orphaned at age six and raised by his grandfather, he was directed toward a military career. Reading his early biographical story is a study in absolute worldliness and self-indulgence. Graduating at the bottom of his class, he earned a reputation as a decadent playboy and supreme pleasure seeker. As extreme as Charles was in practicing vice, so was he after his conversion in practicing virtue. He deemed the Trappist life too comfortable for himself and eventually left to follow his inspiration of living radical poverty like Jesus of Nazareth. Returning to the forsaken deserts of Algeria where he was once stationed, he sought to develop a new model of religious life where he would live among the poor in a spirit of service and prayerful solitude. For 15 years Charles prayed and waited for followers to arrive. The few that came did not stay. Killed by Tuareg rebels in 1916, Blessed Charles never accomplished his desire of bringing a religious community to birth. However, God's ways are not our ways and eventually Charles' witness bore fruit. Years later in 1933 communities of men and women religious modeled themselves after his example and exist today. What seemed like apparent failure was the basis for new life in the Spirit, for Charles' perseverance had touched the heart of God.

There is another attribute of prayer that touches the Heart of God that I would like to mention and that is a spirit of sacrifice. I found it interesting that in the writings of Saint Margaret Mary Alacoque, the Visitation nun who received messages from the Sacred Heart of Jesus in the 17th century, there are very few references to her prayer. There are, on the other hand, many references to her sufferings and the acceptance of our crosses. No doubt, effective prayer in her mind and in the mind of other great saints, was and is always coupled with a spirit of sacrifice. Very often she writes to religious and laity alike to exhort them to love the cross and to accept those that the Lord permits us to have "as precious pledges of the love of the divine Heart." She emphasizes, "He wants to make us like unto Himself. We must prove our love for Him by lovingly embracing the cross." When the Heart of Jesus sees us suffering bravely and without bitter complaints, his heart can barely contain itself in pouring out his graces upon us and in answering those longings of our hearts that seem impossible on a human level.

Probably one of the most accessible examples of how sufferings willingly accepted and sacrifices readily made touches the Heart of God is the Italian stigmatist, Saint Padre Pio (1887-1968). For fifty years, this holy priest bore the wounds of Christ in his hands, feet and side and, as we know, thousands upon thousands of people turned to him to intercede before the throne of God for physical and spiritual healing, during his lifetime and after his earthly life.

There are countless stories of how his prayer effected marvels for afflicted humanity. Each evening he led his community of Capuchin friars in a novena to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and included all those intentions entrusted to him.



By way of example, I have chosen the following well-known story to illustrate how this holy friar's prayers touched the Heart of God.

In the later part of the 1940's, the Friary of Our Lady of Grace in San Giovanni Rotondo where Padre Pio was stationed, was building an annex on to their monastery. Thirty-five year old Giovanni Savino, a construction worker and friend of Pio, had the custom of attending Padre Pio's morning Mass, and then headed to the sacristy where he received the friar's blessing before going to the building site. On February 12, 1949, Giovanni was taken aback as Pio announced to him after his blessing, "Courage, Giovanni, I am praying to the Lord that you might not be killed." Savino, startled, replied, "What is going to happen to me?" Padre Pio remained silent.

On the following two mornings, the same thing happened. Alarmed about an impending accident after Savino heard the same warning on the fourth day, he told his crew that he didn't want to work that day. The team decided to go ahead anyway and started blasting apart the rock for the foundation. At 2 p.m. Savino and a companion planted a stick of dynamite under a boulder and lit the fuse. Nothing happened, that is until Savino checked the charge a few minutes later. As he bent down, the dynamite exploded in his face. He was rushed to the hospital and admitted to surgery. Embedded in he left eye were numerous foreign particles, but the right eye was entirely shattered. While this was happening, Padre Pio was asking everyone he knew to pray for Giovanni for three days. The Blessed Sacrament was exposed for the injured man's intentions. It is recorded that Pio was heard to pray, "Lord, I offer you one of my eyes for Giovanni, because he is the father of a family."

Toward the end of February, the hospitalized man, while praying the rosary, smelled the peculiar heavenly fragrance of Padre Pio and felt his presence near him. Later that morning, Giovanni declared to the doctor who was examining him, "I can see you with my right eye. I don't see anything out of my left eye." The doctor, an atheist, insisted this was impossible since the right eye was completely gone. Yet, somehow Giovanni could see perfectly out of it! When Savino returned to thank Padre Pio after being hospitalized for several months, the priest's response was, "If you only knew what this cost me!" An incident related by another friend of Padre Pio recalled a day in the friary garden when inexplicably Pio suddenly became blind, and then after about thirty minutes his sight returned. Perhaps this came about because of Padre Pio's offering. It is an established fact that Giovanni Savino had perfect eyesight in a socket containing only a small remnant of eye tissue until the day he died.

Prayers were and are answered. We should, however, be aware that Padre Pio often implied that certain future events are in the eternal plan of God and not subject to change, whereas others depend on our prayers and sacrifices. Moreover, all our prayers are answered In a way that benefit



the people we pray for, if not physically then spiritually, provided there is the slightest turning towards God.

Finally, there is one more aspect of prayer that touches God's heart that cannot be left out. Let's call this the love of Mary. The Sacred Heart of Jesus treasures his mother so much that he has given this Women Clothed with the Sun tremendous intercessory powers. Padre Pio himself shared with one of his friends who was blind that if he would like to be healed "we will pray to the Madonna, who is so good and has such power over the heart of her son, Jesus." A love of Mary cannot be separated from a love of the Heart of Jesus, and Mary's help is extremely valuable.

Summing up, we have talked about four attributes that make our prayer very potent before the Heart of Our Redeemer: (what I call) the spirit of leaning, perseverance, the spirit of sacrifice and the love of Mary. People whose prayer was and is life-giving and powerful utilized these ways to draw closer to the Sacred Heart and to receive the graces he has promised to shower upon us. May our prayers be enhanced by these time-tested traits and may we and our loved ones receive all the blessings and healing we need from the Hearts of Jesus and Mary who love us beyond measure.