



THE CONSTANCY OF THE SACRED HEART: Amid the Changes in our Lives

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Dear Friends of the Heart of Christ.

In the midst of this beautiful autumnal season, we gather prayerfully again to consider the beauty and the love of the Sacred Heart in our lives. The heart symbolizes for us God's innermost being and God's fundamental relationship with us. It is the image of the constancy of the love of God. The changing seasons and the changing patterns of our own personal lives draw us forward toward ever increasing opportunities for a deepening awareness of our relationship with God and his consistent love for us. But change can pull us away from our moorings; it unsettles us and we can feel as though we have been forgotten by God's loving attentions. We may be faced with a situation over which we have no control: a loss of a job due to company cutbacks; a loss of physical freedom due to illness; a loss of a loved one due to death. These dramatic changes in our daily routines, our hearts' routines, can cause us to question God's place in our lives. But our greatest dread will become the very chink through which God comes into our lives. God is not (as we are) waiting for things to get better but is working like a seed fallen in the soil of our souls. God comes where we already are.

By becoming man, Our Lord knew the experience of poverty, rejection of his mission, loss of loved ones, infidelity of his closest friends. So in turning to the Sacred Heart, which is the expression of the great and prodigal love of the Father for us through His Son, we are nourished and carried through the difficulties by one who is intimately aware of our needs. As St. Paul's first letter to Timothy states: "If we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot deny himself." We need to look beyond the pain of sudden or unexpected change with eyes of faith in order to overcome the very human feeling of being abandoned. As Our Lord stayed in constant communication with the Father through prayer, we too must stay in contact.

During the Depression, a hard-working furniture upholsterer moved his family: a wife and four teen-agers, to a larger city, hoping for better opportunities. There were none. The eldest child, a young woman, was the only one who found work-at Woolworth's-and was able to bring home \$14.00 a week. The three teen-aged boys quit school to try to find odd jobs. And then the announcement came that another baby was on the way!! The head of the household-a deeply religious man-told family members years later that he had had fleeting thoughts of suicide, the burden seemed so heavy. But he held on to life and his belief in God's Divine plan, for he was a man of faith who read the Scriptures on a daily basis. A girl was born who became the joy of the family and a distraction from the current problems. She brought new hope and new life during the troubled times. We need to know the patience of the heart of Christ-to wait out the winter-trusting, having faith that spring

God be Praised!



WILL come. Even in the bleakness of winter we can find breath-taking beauty. We will also find that in our Covenant relationship with God, the Covenant is not OUR commitment to God, but GOD'S commitment to us! God offers no magic answer to the pains and problems of life, but the merciful and generous alchemy of God does something more, it shares and transfigures our anguish from within, making it redemptive and creative, just as the seed, trampled into the soil in the autumn, hidden away during the winter, then sprouts in all it's glory in the warmth of spring.

Alfred Delp, a Jesuit priest, who in his 30's died in a concentration camp during the Second World War, wrote in one of his meditations: "It comes down to a fundamental personal relationship between the Second Person of the Trinity and humanity: ME. It is here that we find the particular mark of the Christian religious sensibility: that Christ is with us, participating in every aspect of life, tempering it, sanctifying it, and actually creating it in the first place and making everything possible." He stated that the basis for the devotion to the Sacred Heart is the cry of the creature in need and the offer of help from God through Jesus Christ. This devotion is one of a gentle approach to the Christian spiritual life-one of self-abandonment, trust, and surrender. Major changes in our lives- the death of a loved one, betrayal of trust, great material losses, even an unexpected child, remind us that we are not in control. We must remember Exodus 34.6: "Our God is a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." We are called to surrender our hold and to "free fall" into God's embrace! A great deal of trust is required when we are so used to arranging our own lives. St. Therese of Lisieux used the image of a little boat in which Our Lord is asleep. She trusted that He was in control, even when it appeared that He was sleeping.

Father Delp stated: "When we venerate the Heart of Jesus, the sheer power of the comforting message, along with its profound consolation, increases more and more as we move into a deeper awareness of God's divine order." Life is not about enduring. We are meant to grow ever deeper in this profound love and union. It can only occur if we are willing to move forward; to accept all from the hand of God; to immerse ourselves in this Heart that has given all for us. We cannot know the details of God's plan for us. He reveals it piece by piece when we are ready. Nothing comes to us without the necessary grace. As we move deeper in our willingness to accept, God often asks more of us.

For some, the "deepening awareness" took them even further, from acceptance to a participation and action that drew them ever onward to a final "yes". We may not be called to such heroic actions, but then most of those who have done so would not have felt themselves called either. But deeply embedded in their hearts was that certainty, that attachment to God's Will, along with the expansive love of a heart that had touched the overpowering Love of The Heart.

In the early 1980's, a plane went down in Washington D.C.-actually into the Potomac River. Many passengers survived, but were injured and struggled in the icy waters until rescue was possible. A man in the water was offered a rope from a helicopter, but he passed it along to another.



The helicopter came back to him, and he passed it again. He did this four times. On the fifth round, he could no longer be found. I am sure that morning as he looked ahead in his day, he could not foresee any event that would present such a decision to him. Something gave him the courage, the hope, the ability to surrender himself in the situation. There must have been some movement of soul that said “yes” to the action he took. He chose to “go deeper”, to risk himself for a greater good. He did not choose the safe path that was offered to him four times. This cannot be just a momentary decision of heroism; the soul of such a one was prepared for that moment by each of the previous moments of his life. He had lived his faith, his generosity, many times over. TIME magazine called him “The Man in the Water” and wrote a very thought-provoking essay about his actions. A few days later, President Reagan paid tribute to him at the end of his State of the Union address, at which his family members were present.

Change can cause us to curl up and protect ourselves: hold on to the known, or it can cause us to reach out, hold on to God’s hand, and take that step into the unknown. It can cause us to look to the Sacred Heart and to go deeper. Most of us will not be asked to make such a generous gesture as The Man in the Water, but we can ready our hearts to say “yes” if we are ever asked by keeping our focus on the loving Heart of Christ; by being centered in our beliefs, by knowing God’s presence in every moment of our lives.

A community of Visitation nuns in Madrid, Spain, lived their quiet, cloistered lives, hidden away from the public, never expecting to face the ultimate decision of life or death. As the Spanish Civil War invaded their quiet world, they were able to escape to the countryside and remain in safety. But their consecrated lives were meant for prayer and the simple duties of the monastery. Seven were chosen to quietly return and carry on with the prayers and the works of the community. Several trusted friends on the outside saw to their needs for food. Then the pressure became worse; their friends pleaded with them to move to a safer hiding place. They finally agreed, taking up residence in a nearby apartment. They were ultimately discovered, arrested, and shot

Each step of the way they were able to ponder and deliberate. They consciously chose each action. They were able to say “yes” because of their constant living in the presence of the One who loved them and had already surrendered Himself for them. Sister Teresa Maria Cavestany wrote to her Jesuit brother: “Here I am in this immense desert, which is what this house seems now trying to fulfill peacefully and with sweetness of heart, the most holy will of God, loving Him with the love of sacrifice and reparation... and trying to give God from moment to moment that which He is asking and ...as He is asking for everything we are giving Him everything,...I am sure that Our Lord would give us the necessary grace... but it would be too great a happiness and too great a grace for so poor a sinner as I...so that we will content ourselves with letting our heart bleed, droplet by droplet, in the small sacrifices of each day.” It was that moment by moment openness to the Lord and His Will; the acceptance of all from His loving hand, that prepared these Sisters for the ultimate acceptance of their martyrdom. They freely chose to follow this path of Love.



When Alfred Delp wrote about “the sheer power of the comforting message” and “its profound consolation, increasing more and more as we move into a deeper awareness of God’s divine order”, he was seated on the side of his bed in his cell, hands manacled, seriously ill, and facing his execution. Literally every freedom had been taken from him except the freedom of soul to choose God in the moment and therefore to be truly free. There is one crucial difference between these two mysteries. In the first, we believe that the bread and wine are always transformed when an ordained priest offers the Eucharistic Prayer. No matter what the state of the priest or the congregation. But in this second mystery, we are transformed only as we join ourselves to the offering upon the altar. In fact, the more fully we offer ourselves on the altar, the more fully we will experience God’s power and grace when we receive Holy Communion!” How blessed are we to believe in the Real Presence of Jesus in the Holy Eucharist. How blessed!!

The theologian, Bernard Häring, wrote of God’s love: “The more we respond to God’s love and his call to return his love, and the more we come to understand what it means to love and be loved by Jesus and with Jesus, the more we become an image of God in reality and truth. Here on earth we are students in the best sense when we learn, in and from the heart of Jesus, to adore the Father and to share in his and Jesus’ love for all people. Our final goal is the eternal feast of love with God in the communion of saints.” Each challenge, each change in our lives, no matter how large or small, contains the hidden God; the love of a Heart that is forever faithful. Nothing can separate us from the love of God.

How can we in a practical way immerse ourselves more fully in God’s love?

Here are a few suggestions gleaned from readings and personal experience.

First, review your own prayer life realistically-have some prayers or practices become so routine that you are not fully aware of God and His presence in and through them? Work to either change them, or become more focused and more aware.

Second, find time for personal solitude. If possible, be fully away from distracting duties and thoughts-even if it can only be 15 or 20 minutes a day. I know of an older couple who had moved from their larger family home to a small apartment. It was difficult to have any time alone, so they decided to use a signal. He would put on his cap, she would wrap a scarf around her shoulders. They could sit undisturbed in prayer and reading. The other person would answer the door or phone and just say that their spouse was unavailable. They said that just knowing that no one would disturb them helped them to gain a deeper focus in prayer.

Third, in your prayer, invoke our Lord under the aspect of His Sacred Heart. This natural symbol of the merciful love of Christ can readily become part of our vocal and mental prayer.

Fourth, make a daily offering in the morning of all your “prayers, works, joys and sufferings of the



day” to the Heart of Christ. This offering of one’s self to the Heart of Christ can be renewed during the course of the day. In this way, we become aware of our Lord’s presence, and speak to Him as a loving companion.

Fifth, our daily offering should be “in union with the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass throughout the world.” Attend daily Mass if at all possible; if not every day, maybe choose one day that is possible; Fridays being a good choice.

Sixth, make a formal act of consecration to the Heart of Jesus in which you surrender and re-dedicate yourself to the Heart of the Divine King. This formal act should not be made only once. It should be renewed frequently, at least once a month. It is similar to the renewal of vows which we do each month as a reminder and a deepening of our own consecration.

Seventh, seek to cultivate a spirit of reparation to the Heart of Christ in prayer and good works. A spirit of reparation shows a concern for unfaithful love and seeks to make up for our own sins and the sins of others.

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