



Where Love Leads: St. Margaret Mary and St. Claude de la Columbiere

by a Sister of the Visitation

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Dear Friends of the Heart of Christ,

Since many of you have been coming to these First Sunday talks for a number of years now, I am certain that you have already learned a lot about the two persons who were most responsible for making the Sacred Heart Devotion known-Saint Margaret Mary and Saint Claude la Coumbiere. Today I would like to share with you some of my reflections on how these two Saints were both prepared for their mission and how their lives were radically changed because of it.

Both Claude and Margaret Mary were from the same region of France. Claude was born on February 2, 1641 in a small town, St. Symphorien, near Vienne, which is twenty miles south of Lyon. Claude's father was a royal notary and his mother, although an orphan, was an heiress of considerable means. Claude was a delicate and sensitive child who nevertheless excelled in his studies. When he was nine years old, his father enrolled him in the Jesuit school in Lyon, the College of our Lady of Perpetual Succor. It was quite a wrench for him to leave home for the first time but he slipped naturally and happily into his niche in the busy world of school.

When he was twelve years old, Claude transferred to the College of the Trinity where he studied the humanities for five years under the former Rector of his Jesuit Petit College, Father Rhodes. He also continued to be a member of a Sodality and as such often worked among the poor. Eight years under the care of instruction of the Jesuits could only result in one thing: he, too, felt called to enter the Society of Jesus. He met with some disappointment on the part of his father, Bertrand, but his mother, Marguerite, convinced her husband to allow Claude to follow his call. In October of 1658 he left for the Jesuit novitiate in Avignon. The two years of the novitiate over, he moved to the College of Saint Joseph where he made his simple vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, and began his last year of philosophy. The long preparation was over and Claude began to teach in October, 1661. Five years later he was sent to the College of Clermont in Paris for his four years of theology in preparation for the priesthood. He was ordained April 6, 1669. He was already known as a brilliant teacher and preacher as well as the revered tutor of the sons of Colbert, Finance Minister of the Sun King, Louis XIV. Claude, while known and admired by the French Court, remained at the same time the humble and fervent son of Saint Ignatius of Loyola.

Then something happened. Colbert falsely accused Claude of writing a stinging satirical poem about him and abruptly dismissed him as tutor to his sons. Following his dismissal, the Jesuit Provincial moved Claude from the prestigious school in Paris to one in Lyons. There he was

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assigned to teach Rhetoric and to act as spiritual director for small boys. Claude de la Colombiere had always been a model Jesuit. God wanted him to be a saint.

Margaret Mary Alacoque was born on the Feast of Saint Mary Magdalen, July 22, 1647. When she was four years old her godmother, wanting some companionship, asked her parents to allow her to live with her in her spacious chateau of Corcheval. Corcheval was a rambling house, perfect for a bright and inquisitive child's play and exploration. Margaret lived with her godmother until Madame de Fautrieres' death four years later. She then returned to her own home, Haute Cour, where, besides her brothers, Jean, Claude Philibert, and Chrysostom, a new little brother, Jacques, awaited her. At the end of the year, however, her father died, leaving her mother with five children and almost insurmountable debts, both owed to the Alacoque as well as needing to be paid. Because Madame Alacoque had to collect payments for what was owed her deceased husband, the three older boys were sent to the Benedictine school in the abbey of Cluny and Margaret was sent to be educated by the Poor Clares in Charolles.

Margaret was a very religious child. The chateau of Corcheval had a chapel to which she was drawn from the beginning of her stay there. She was energetic and loved to play, but there also was another side of her that was irresistibly drawn to the Blessed Sacrament, reserved in the chapel. She spent many hours of prayer there and was often led to pray these words, "O my God, I dedicate to You my purity and I make to You a vow of perpetual chastity." She neither understood what she had done nor what the word vow meant, much less the word, "chastity". When she was with the Poor Clares, they noticed her great attraction to the Eucharist and arranged for her to make her First Holy Communion at a younger age than was the norm in those days.

The nuns, who had been so eager that Margaret be allowed to make her Communion at such an early age (she was nine), now began to wonder if they had done the right thing. The child, so full of life and gayety, would now suddenly break off in the middle of a game, rush off, leaving her playmates surprised and annoyed, and would be found praying in the chapel or in some hidden place in the garden. Margaret tells us in her autobiography, "This Communion embittered all my small pleasures and amusements for me" and drew me to some solitary place to pray. Such tension caused by her natural vivacity and her mystical drawing to prayer led her to fall into a grave illness which left her completely helpless. She was sent home from the Poor Clares to be nursed by her mother. In desperation her mother suggested to Margaret that she make a vow to the Blessed Virgin, promising that, if she cured her she would one day become one of her daughters. Margaret was cured.

The Alacoque home was one of those large patriarchal households common in the Europe of the 17th century. The Alacoques, Margaret and her mother, Philaberte were a minority at Haute Cour, the family home. Philiberte's four sons were still away at school so there was just Margaret and herself living there. Madame Alacoque's sister-in-law, Catherine, Catherine's sister, Benoitte, married



to Toussaint Delaroche, and their three children who lived at Haute Cour acted as though they owned it. The conduct of the Toussaint women toward Margaret and her mother was despicable. The two of them were literally captives in their own home.

Their release finally came when Margaret's older brothers, Jean and Philibert, returned to take possession of the estate. However, tragedy struck, and both brothers died within quick succession of each other. It was not until Chrysostom came home that order was fully re-established, and Margaret and her mother were restored to their rightful place in the household.

Margaret was now free to enter society and she delighted in attending the many festivities and balls that took place in the surrounding chateaux. Since she was attractive, several eligible bachelors were interested in her. They realized that she would bring an excellent dowry to a marriage and would make a good wife. However, there was continual warfare between Margaret's natural love of pleasure and that deeper desire, "I wished to be burnt away like a candle so as to give Our Lord back love for love." After one Communion, Our Lord appeared to her to remind her that she was vowed to Him from her earliest infancy. At that moment she resolved to enter the religious life.

To assist her in making her choice, her brother, Chrysostom, took Margaret to visit several convents, in particular the Ursulines in Macon and the Visitandines in Paray-le-Monial. No sooner had she stepped into the parlor of the Visitation than she heard, "It is here that I wish you to be."

It would be so lovely if we could say that once Margaret entered the monastery she lived happily ever after, with not a concern in her life but to live the Rule of the Visitation and to be no different than any other Sister in the monastery. However, that was not God's Will for her; that was not the path on which Love was leading her. From earliest childhood Margaret had received extraordinary graces from the Lord's love and He, Himself, had been her Teacher. Her superiors were concerned because of her spiritual gifts; theologians who were consulted declared that she was deluded; the community did not understand her because she was different. Her sensitive heart was full of anguish at their seeming rejection.

The Sacred Heart of Jesus comforts His friends even in the midst of their suffering. Quite suddenly a new Jesuit superior arrived in Paray-le-Monial. It had been hinted to him by his superiors that he was there to help a chosen soul in addition to his ministry to his brother Jesuits and to the school.

Mother de Saumaise, the superior at the Visitation monastery, announced to the community that the new Jesuit superior would be giving a conference to the Sisters in the near future and that he would hear their confessions during the Ember Days. Even though Sister Margaret Mary felt a great fear and repugnance to reveal her spiritual gifts to Father de la Colombiere, she finally did so.



We read in Holy Scripture these beautiful words, “I am come to send fire on the earth and what will I but that it be kindled?” The revelations made by Our Lord to Saint Margaret Mary are simple but profound. He told her, “My divine Heart is so impassioned with love for men and for you in particular that, unable any longer to contain the flames of Its burning charity, they must be spread abroad by you. I have chosen you as an abyss of unworthiness and ignorance to carry out this great design, so that all may be done by Me alone.” When Father de la Colombiere heard these words, he realized that here was something new, a definite command to make know a devotion to and knowledge of the Heart of the Word made flesh, a command made through the instrumentality of an enclosed nun hidden for the rest of her life behind the grille of a monastery in an obscure little Burgundian town.

This first revelation had been the preparation for the second. This second revelation showed what form this devotion would take. “Receive Me in the Blessed Sacrament as often as obedience allows... You will also communicate the first Friday of every month and every Thursday night you will rise between eleven and midnight to prostrate yourself for an hour with Me, sharing with me the deathly sadness I felt in the Garden of Olives...” The Holy Hour and Communion on First Fridays were to be made in reparation for the coldness and sins of all men and women. In the third revelation Our Lord asked that a special feast be instituted by the Church in honor of his Sacred Heart to be celebrated on the first Friday following the Solemnity of Corpus Christi, the Body and Blood of the Lord.

Claude de la Colombiere became Sister Margaret Mary’s director and the chosen instrument to make known the revelations of the Sacred Heart to the world. However, one year later Father de la Colombiere was appointed to the Court of Saint James in England to be the chaplain and confessor of the Duchess of York, Mary of Modena. Sister Margaret Mary complained to the Lord about the loss of this treasured guide who had restored her peace. But Our Lord responded, “What? Am I not enough for you, I your beginning and your end?” Love leads us to always put God first in our lives; all of our other loves are to take second place.

Saint Margaret Mary, to whom Our Lord had chosen to reveal the depths of the love of His Heart, had experienced a great deal of suffering in her young life and had been given mystical gifts. No doubt she had hoped that her life would take on a certain peace and tranquility once she had entered the cloister. We have seen, however, that her life in the monastery was replete with suffering. Sometimes she was misunderstood both by her superiors and by her other Visitation sisters. Only towards the end of her life did she come to a plateau of peace.

Saint Claude, too, while at times experiencing brilliant success in his ministry, was later betrayed by a convert and condemned to an English prison. Under the hardships of prison life, his health

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completely broke down and while he escaped execution by being banished to his homeland, he was ill during the few years of life that remained to him.

I know that many of you have seen the film, *The Passion of the Christ*. So many people have told us that it led them to be even more thankful for the gift of Christ's redemption. They also indicated that through the film, our Blessed Mother became more real for them. Let us remember that through Baptism we have been inserted into the Passion and Death of Jesus. Each of us is invited to follow Jesus wherever His Love Leads

God be Praised!