

How to love *the Sacred Heart of Jesus*

Dear Friends of the Heart of Christ,

This month, dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, has turned my thoughts to the topic of love. How are we as frail human beings expected to love the merciful, compassionate, caring, all-powerful Sacred Heart of Jesus? Without doubt, we creatures are called to love the Lord who made us and wants to share eternity with us. St. Margaret Mary writes very explicitly that “we must love the Sacred Heart with all our strength and with all our capacity. Yes, we must love Him and He will establish His empire and will reign in spite of all His enemies and their opposition.” An analogy I recently came across has helped me commence this exploration of *how to love the Sacred Heart*. This example from a human experience may help us understand the kind of love Jesus expects from us. It comes from the life of Alice von Hildebrand, the wife of the noted Catholic philosopher Dietrich von Hildebrand. She writes, “At the age of five, I had a first inking of this truth: There is no greater love than to give one’s life for one’s friends. I was deadly sick with double pneumonia at a time when antibiotics were unknown. Small as I was, I was conscious that I was close to death. I recall as clearly as it were yesterday, that my anxious mother bent over my little white wooden bed and murmured: ‘Darling, how I wish I could suffer this for you.’ I was so weak that I did not even open my eyes. I did not say ‘thank you’ but once again, I recall with incredible clarity that I said to myself, ‘Don’t ever forget this. This is true love.’”

When we love, really love someone—human or divine—we want to give our best to them and sometimes that entails suffering for them. Listen to this account by St. Gemma Galgani... “My greatest affliction,” the Italian mystic writes, “was not being able to love Jesus as I wished. I tried eagerly not to offend Him, but my bad inclination to evil was so strong that without a special grace from God I would have fallen into hell. Not knowing how to love Jesus caused me much concern, but He in His infinite goodness, was never ashamed to humiliate me in order that He might become my Master. One evening when I was at prayer, He came to bring peace to my soul. I felt myself entirely recollected and I found myself for a second time before Jesus Crucified. He said to me, ‘Look, daughter, and learn how to love’ and He showed me His five open wounds. ‘Do you see this cross, these thorns, these nails, these bruises, these tears, these wounds, this blood? They are all works of love—of infinite love. Do you see how much I have loved you? Do you really want to love Me? Then first learn how to suffer.’”

In reading the lives of the saints and in the life of St. Margaret Mary especially, one will find this very significant spiritual concept: There is a mysterious connection between love and suffering, a connection so characteristic of devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. From her earliest years, St. Margaret Mary had a desire to be conformed to Christ in his sufferings. This impulse, this interior yearning was planted there by Christ himself. It was a work of grace. She knew in her heart of hearts that all her suffering, all the

In an article written by Msgr. Charles Pope of the Archdiocese of Washington, he asks, "What is the deepest root of sin?" In answering this question, he hints, "It's not in your wallet, and it's much closer than you might think." The answer to this question according to famous Church theologians as St. Thomas Aquinas is—inordinate self-love. According to Msgr. Pope's analysis, all sin springs from this root, including the original sin of Adam and Eve and the sin of rebellion of the fallen angels. When Satan tempted Eve, he suggested that if she ate the apple from the tree in the middle of the garden, she would be like God (Gen. 3:5). The fallen angels declared they would not serve God. Why? Because both Adam and Eve and the fallen angels chose to love themselves more than God. Msgr. Pope summarizes his thoughts by concluding: "The inordinate love of self is the most fundamental root of all sin. We all know its power and its pernicious quality. Even the most wonderful things we do are tainted when we do them for personal praise and glory than for love of God and neighbor."

This important spiritual insight was well understood by the friends of God. When the self seeks to determine what is right and wrong according to the natural law and God's commandments, it attempts to become its own God. How could such an absurd negation of reality bear good fruit? Yet, as we look around us today, we are flooded with examples of this kind of thinking. One Catholic commentator has referred to it as being immersed in the culture of insanity. When creatures try to seize divine prerogatives and construct their own systems of morality for themselves and for the rest of society, they are living in a world of delusion, in a world of deep self-deception. The result is only temporary euphoria, followed by a disenchantment from having separated oneself from the truth and The Truth. Ultimately, one arrives at a state of folly—a profound posture of alienation from divine wisdom.

I need not call to mind specific examples of what I have just written because all you have to do is read the recent news. This is our world today and we have a choice to make. Are we going to live by Catholic Christian values or are we going to mitigate these and blend in with the greater part of society? If we are going to take our cues from the saints, like St. Margaret Mary, then we have our work cut out for us. It was said of her, "Men of the world may love honors and riches, but no such lover can surpass her in her love of the exact opposite of what the world loves and embraces." If the world or the worldly, which is always looking to attain riches and honors, is our model, then we can expect to receive the kind of "peace" that it will give us—uncertain, transient, dependent on fluctuating circumstances. If our goal is pure love of Christ, selfless living, moral rectitude, then we will attain that peace of Christ that surpasses all understanding and endures through every trial. What greater gift is there than true peace of heart in the midst of suffering and anxiety and the knowledge that we are right with God and that He is near us?

Let us re-examine some important points from the life of St. Margaret Mary (1647-1690). It is true that she had a thirst to suffer for Christ's loving heart and that she embraced her suffering and humiliations as a means of drawing closer to Him. She did this because she was convinced of the fact that these sufferings would purify her love of the Lord, cleansing it of any self-interests. If we think that this made her life miserable or unhappy, her letters set us right. Her desire for suffering and its fulfillment in actual afflictions brought her joy and peace. This may sound strange to us, but for those who have suffered selflessly and who have not become embittered by it—offering their pain in a mystical way for souls—there is a divine compensation that defies human explanation. Simply put: love—that is, sacrificial love—brings peace. The gift of ourselves in pure love for the Sacred Heart establishes in our hearts His reign of love and peace. And so closely are love and peace connected that the enemy of peace is the very same enemy of pure love: self-love which leads to that useless reflection on self which troubles and upsets our very souls. In practical terms, we can conclude that the way to peace is a complete abandonment to God's will. We see this so clearly in the life of St. Margaret Mary who tells us again and again that she has in her heart an unchangeable and immovable peace.

To live with an attitude of cultivating pure love of God is a great challenge for us today. We have before us so many examples of false love that always endeavor to put "me" in the center. This ploy—used so effectively by the world—gives the devil ready access to our hearts. This is the button he pushes for easy (and disastrous) results. We have probably heard the story from Greek mythology of Narcissus. He was a handsome youth, who while gazing at his reflection in a pool of water, fell in love with himself. Smitten by his own image, his efforts at admiring himself caused him to tumble forward into the water and drown. From him we derive the term narcissism. People with this tendency have an inflated sense of their own importance and a deep need for admiration. We see around us so much of this kind of behavior that is legitimized by our media and educational process. But living the gospel means that we have been freed by Christ not to love ourselves, but that we have been freed from self-obsession. The cross does not free us for the ego trip but the cross frees us from the ego trip. It's not that God wants us to suffer, but he knows that suffering provides us with the opportunity to cooperate with his grace.

Perusing over some pertinent articles for this talk, I came across an enlightening comment from a retired gentleman. He was musing upon the fact that his friends and acquaintances have been loud in their recommendations that he relax and enjoy himself during his retirement, that he should now take care of himself by spending his time in pleasurable pursuits. His reaction to this was a reflective response on his Christian duties. He said what he really wanted to do with his time was to volunteer his services to some helping organization. He pointed out that he was keeping in mind the acronym—JOY—that is how he would like to prioritize the rest of his life: **J** for Jesus first, **O** for others and **Y** for you, in the last place.

In this month dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, let us ask for the grace of a greater love of God, a proper love of self, and the gift to love our neighbor with that same proper love. With these in their right places, the blessings of Christ's Heart are sure to descend upon us. +

This talk on Sacred Heart spirituality was given in our Gathering Room on June 7th, 2015. If you would like to attend similar presentations by the sisters, our next talk will be held on Sunday, August 2nd, 2015 at 4:00 p.m.