

# ANSWER

to our secular age:

## The Coming Reign of the Sacred Heart

Dear Friends of the Heart of Christ,

Several weeks ago, I read an article that keeps coming to mind as I prepare this talk. It was about a sophisticated light show that was projected onto the Empire State Building in New York City. The show, utilizing advanced digital light technology, was beamed over a space of 33 floors onto the south side of the skyscraper. Its implied purpose was to raise the awareness about wildlife extinction. Gigantic images of birds, snakes, and land and sea creatures were portrayed in light. As a grand finale, the organizers chose to project upon the building a startling image. It was of the Hindu goddess of time and destruction—Kali—a name which literally means “she who is black” or “she who is death.” The immense black goddess with outstretched red tongue (dripping with blood), hovered over the Empire City. [Statistics state that New York City is the only city in America where more black babies are aborted than are born alive.] Thinking about this makes one wonder how we have evolved as a society that now allows such an ominous image to be exhibited publicly without widespread protest. Fifty or so years ago, in this exact same city, light displays forming symbols of the Holy Cross were shining from these skyscrapers. What has happened in our society, in our world, to make such a profound change over the years?

It's obvious in our public marketplaces that references to God have all but been eradicated from our senses, and even from our consciousness. Don't we experience this quite radically as Christmas approaches. We all have witnessed the secularization of the Christmas season. Gone are the prolific Nativity scenes that once graced nearly every town square. Gone is the mention of Christmas' real meaning from public education. Even the red and green of the season are threatening reminders to some of the deeper meaning of the so-called “holiday season.” I am sure we can think of many examples from our childhood days that are probably anathema now in today's secular society. Charles Taylor in his book entitled *A Secular Age*, contends that understanding secularity in terms of public places means that they have allegedly been emptied of God or any reference to ultimate reality. What has occurred to bring us into this secular age is that people have transitioned from finding it virtually impossible not to believe in God to one which faith in God is only one possibility. As Americans, we are now surrounded with thinking that has relegated religious belief and even religiously motivated behaviors to a private arena so that they will not disturb the sensibilities of godless persons and cultures.

One may wonder, can religion really survive in such a secular environment—let alone flourish? The answer to that question, I believe, is a definite yes. But it has to be a countervoice that challenges the conventional wisdom and practices of our day. Caving into the mindset of modern society and diluting Catholic/Christian teachings and traditions is not the way. And how do we know this? What gives us this conviction that God's ways—God's laws—will win out in the end? Well, one clear indication is from the Sacred Heart of Jesus himself. If one reads the letters of St. Margaret Mary, she repeatedly tells us that the Sacred Heart of Jesus promised us that he was going to be victorious over Satan's machinations: “I shall reign in spite of my enemies and all those who oppose it.” Jesus is talking about the opposition that we will endure because we are faithful to his Sacred Heart, to his commandments and counsels and instructions. Distortion of his Word and the twisting of his Divine Messages to justify our own personal preferences and lifestyles will not triumph in the end. The powers of evil may look like they are winning a battle here and there, but in the end, God's power will prevail over all and His Sacred Heart will reign.

If we are watchful and alert (and do not place our trust in the analyses and proclamations of secular-relativistic media sources), we can perceive signs of Christ's kingdom making themselves known and felt in the midst of our darkened world today. Hints of God's existence and his creating purpose are penetrating even the most obdurate hearts. In an article entitled “*Is That All There Is?—Secularism and its discontents*” by *New Yorker* critic James Wood, the writer begins by relating a reoccurring experience of his friend who is an analytic

philosopher and a convinced atheist. She told him that sometimes she wakes in the middle of the night anxiously turning over a series of ultimate questions: "How can it be," she wonders, "that this world is the result of an accidental big bang? How could there be no design, no metaphysical purpose? Can it be that every life—beginning with my own, my husband's, my child's and spreading outward—is cosmically irrelevant?" For questions like these, convicted atheists have no compelling answers. The author goes on to muse upon the fact that as one gets older, as parents and friends begin to die, one's own projects seem ever more pointless and ephemeral and moments of doubt and terror begin to seep into one's consciousness more frequently and more piercingly.

This was certainly the case for Dr. Donald Whitaker, M.D. (+2007), a physician who was a pioneer in nutritional medicine and developed his own line of vitamins and nutritional supplements. Doctor Whitaker's story is quite impressive. A staunch atheist for years, as well as a highly gifted and innovative doctor and researcher, Whitaker's life had taken the road of unabashed pleasure-seeking. Apart from his medical practice, he ran the gamut of drugs, alcohol, women and just about every indulgence humans can experience. Of course, it was just a matter of time before it all caught up with him. A debilitating illness finally landed him in the hospital where he was diagnosed with acute hemorrhagic necrotic pancreatitis. Doctors gave him very little hope of recovery. He realized he was in serious trouble. One night in the hospital when he was in agony, he felt his soul leave his body. Unlike other near-death experiences that he had read of or heard about, he says that he entered a dark tunnel. Total, absolute blackness surrounded him and began to penetrate him. It was the most terrifying experience of his life. Struggling to get back into his body, he re-entered it with a thud. Now he knew he needed help. Remembering a devout Christian whom he had debated in the past and in whom he trusted for his sincerity and uprightness, Whitaker asked the doctors to contact him. Finally, when this Christian man arrived, he found Whitaker now open to God's Word. Introduced to Christ and his teaching, Whitaker made his life over to the Lord. He declared that never in his life had he known such profound peace although he had searched for it in every avenue under the sun. Against all odds, he survived and spent the rest of his days proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ around the world.

Other atheists have also been changing their minds. Recently, a new book by Ignatius Press has come out that tells the story of a young atheist professor who has turned to Catholicism. Under the title: "*Not God's Type: An Atheist Academic Lays Down Her Arms*," Dr. Holly Ordway describes her gradual conversion to a believing and practicing Catholic. As an atheist she says she didn't understand that Christian teachings on virtue and morality were anything other than a set of rules and pious slogans. She explains, "I didn't know that the Church offered a relationship with a living Person who would, if you would allow it, do something to change and transform you into a new person, a fully alive person... It's only since I've become a Catholic that I've begun to fully appreciate the fullness and transformative power of God's grace..."

The fullness and transformative power of God's grace... Yes, God's grace can effect changes in us far beyond what we can do on our own or what the world's mere human methods and techniques can produce. When we focus on Christ and his eternal love for us, that is, when we honor the Sacred Heart of Jesus and put our trust in him, we are in effect opening the door to Him and unleashing his graces and blessings upon us. A wonderful visual depiction of this is portrayed in Warner Sallman's (1892-1968) painting called "*Christ at Heart's Door*." The painting depicts Jesus knocking at a wooden door which is highlighted by a warm light emanating from his heart. Christ's barely concealed heart is indicated by a white luminance that casts its glow over a somewhat darkened scene of a house's entryway. Jesus knocks, but the door has no exterior knob, inferring that one must open one's heart to Christ from *within*—He will not force his way inside. Based on the verse from the Book of Revelation 3:20, "Behold I stand at the door and knock," the painting has often been interpreted as the Lord's call to the soul who is ensnared in the traps of sin and the darkness of ignorance and willfulness. But all is not hopeless, for in the door there is an opening of grillwork so that the individual soul may see who is at the door and perceive that he is good and kind. Further examination of the scripture verse upon which the painting is based leads to a deeper interpretation. Revelation 3:20 is a portion of one of the seven letters to the seven churches in Asia Minor. It is addressed to the church at Laodicea. The Lord referred to this church as "lukewarm"—meaning that it had become spiritually apathetic and lazy. They had begun to close their hearts to the Lord, no longer feeling the need to rely on him and his guidance. In other words, they wanted to do things their way. Because of this, the Lord says to them in the preceding verse 19: "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent." That is, we must abandon our willfulness and spiritual blindness and repent. In God's great mercy and grace, instead of coming at us with vengeance and judgment, he is offering us a fresh start. Therefore, Revelation 3:20 on which Sallman's painting is based is a wake-up call. In his vast love, Jesus says we must repent if we are ever to experience that sense of intimacy with his heart, otherwise we leave him out in the cold by our sinfulness.

Though all creation obeys the Lord of the Universe, God has given each of us a free will to say yes or no to his entrance into our hearts. As we know so well, not all of God's creatures obey him. Many are tempted and want to win the approval of others rather than of God. Many are eager to please others before their God. For some, it is self-interest that makes them disregard their Maker's voice. For others, they have not yet decided to put behind them their passions and their self-indulgences. That is why every attempt should be made to lessen God's holy wrath, for the Book of Sirach tells us: "Mercy and anger alike are with him; he remits and forgives, but also pours out wrath; Great as his mercy is his punishment; he judges people, each according to their deeds" (Si:16:11-12). May this time of God's mercy prepare us for the coming reign of the Sacred Heart of Jesus when all nations and all hearts will acknowledge and serve him as their Savior and King.+

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*This talk on Sacred Heart spirituality was given in our Gathering Room on December 6th, 2015. If you would like to attend similar presentations by the sisters, our next talk will be held on Sunday, February 7th, 2016 at 4:00 p.m.*