

The Sacred Heart's lenten mission:

melting down our hardened hearts

Dear Friends of the Sacred Heart,

Once upon a time there was a mother who had a son, whom she treated with great love, indeed with nothing but love. The son grew up into a good-for-nothing and finally, on account of a degrading love affair, killed his mother. But in his confusion he tore his mother's heart from her body, thinking to bury it in the garden near his house. As he went down the hillside he stumbled and fell, and his mother's heart rolled away downhill. When the son, injured, got up and ran after the heart, what did he hear but the heart calling to him: 'Son, did you hurt yourself?' *

Startling though this story may sound it does dramatize the mystery of love. It is uncanny what love can endure, what it can accomplish, what it can transform, and perhaps most of all, that it has the ability to melt down our hardened human hearts. This is the message of the Sacred Heart. As one spiritual writer put it: "The revelation of the Sacred Heart shows the scope and meaning of love. It shows that nothing matters but love. It brings tenderness into religion by presenting an image of warmth, a desire for relationship, and an abiding sense of divine assurance. The warmth of Jesus is what melts our cold, cold heart and makes us more radiant with love" {online resource by David Richo, #14 The Revelation of The Sacred Heart, copyright 2007-2014}.

One would think this type of theology (yes, a theology of love) would be most appealing. Confronted with the invitation to be more loving, to have the assurance that divine mercy would be available for our asking, we would assume that no sane person would choose not to immerse themselves in the gifts of grace that flow from the Heart of Christ. But, incredibly, it is not so. Though God causes love to be in us, though He raises us to the status of being lovable, and of loving Him in return, yet because of our freedom, we can turn away from this divine intimacy, we can harden our hearts into a block of resistance. Lent is a six week intensive reminder that our biblical ancestors did not always have the wisdom to follow where the Lord was leading (to heed His ways), nor did the disciples of Jesus (despite the instructions and example of the Master) comprehend the full significance of their sacred calling. The story of salvation vividly illustrates just how dense the human heart can be (even in the presence of Truth itself). Yet, the patient, loving heart of God continually pours forth the power of grace, the power of regenerative love.

Living, however, in a world that shows so little concern about the power of grace or its marvelous effects, we can easily find ourselves left dangling at the edge of despair. In fact, it has been pointed out that despair (or its equivalent pessimism) can also take the form of presumption. This type of thinking swings from a hopelessness that sees oneself as unlovable and not worthy to a manifest distrust of God's power to change hearts and a presumption that God really doesn't care much about the human heart. As one writer expressed it: "God is too busy to care about my paltry sins. None are loved personally as they are, but rather all are loved in a great, amorphous mass of humanity that could not but be saved. One need not be in a state of grace... because the state of grace is not a real possibility for most people."** This dire way of seeing ourselves only leaves us with a deep sense of alienation... a far cry from the encouragement that comes from the saints (like St. Therese of the Child Jesus) who tells us: "Do you realize that Jesus is there in the tabernacle expressly for you-- for you alone? He burns with the desire to come into your heart... Go without fear to receive the Jesus of peace and love."

If we reach this realization of God's boundless universal love, not just for the whole, but for the particular, then we become aware that no sinner is out of reach to God's merciful arm and heart. Each one of us is meant to be lifted up to a new life, to be

granted the grace to overcome any situation that is marked by darkness and sin. Because of God's love for us we are enabled to know genuine goodness and to be drawn into the heart of God. As one convert admitted after years of struggling with this 'presence of love': "In time I found it impossible to believe that the universe was created out of nothing. There was order, direction, and love. Those things all pointed to some larger, unfathomable consciousness. I realized I could not believe that human hearts and minds came into being randomly" {p. 29 in *Atheist to Catholic: Stories of Conversion*, edited by R. V. Cherico, Servant Books, 2011}.

From the scripture scholar William Barclay we learn what true hardness of heart entails. Here is his interesting interpretation of it: "The hardness is not the hardness of cruelty or lack of sympathy. It is the hardness of impenetrability. These words can be used of a callus, of hardened skin which has lost its feeling. They can be used of a new bone formation which knits a fracture and which is harder than the bone itself. They can be used of rock or marble which is so hard that no impression can be made upon it. In the New Testament hardness of heart is not the cruelty which we usually associate with the expression hard-hearted; it is the utter impenetrability and insensitiveness into which truth cannot gain an entry." Perhaps that is why some have described our contemporary world as being in a "crisis of love" because love no longer makes the Christian life 'easy', nor its moral demands worth carrying.** Because in the long run of things, we humans spurn the thought of being drawn into the heart of God, preferring, instead, to have our own hearts as center. So we do not trust the very idea that God's providence is at work, that God's salvation is readily available to us, that grace can aid us through all the difficult and unruly circumstances of our lives.

This is where the 'everlasting' battle for our hearts resides, for we must pray to allow grace to touch us and soften our intractably 'self-focussed' hearts. We must be willing to put on the mantle of co-operation (even as Mary did at her annunciation), knowing that our place is not to be master, but creature. Thus, we need the divine graces that only the heart of God can bestow. Fortified with these new inner spiritual resources we can progress toward virtue and living grace-filled lives. How right St. Therese of Lisieux was when she understood that God would pity her in her lowliness and littleness when she offered these to His great mercy, seeing that He always raises up those who are bowed down, those whose disposition of spirit is humble and contrite.

One of my favorite childhood fun things to do (when I had the rare opportunity) was riding the roller coaster at the nearby amusement park. Sitting in the seat, jammed in with my twin sister on one end and me at the other end, and my father in the middle, holding his arms around us both, we exhilarated in the bruising jolts and stomach dropping turns of those few minutes of sheer enjoyment. At the time there wasn't a worry about getting hurt or crashing, just the experience of overwhelming joy and openness to the thrill of the moment. That sense of freedom could very well be likened to what God wishes to bless each of us with: not the constriction of our sins but the expansiveness of knowing that we are 'children of God' whose lives have real meaning when immersed in the graces of His merciful heart.

So the promise we Christians inherit is the promise of a new heart; one that won't fail to grasp what is true and good; one that won't be misguided by the bogus forms of truth (that surround us and) that breed "dissolution, confusion, and death" instead of new life. Here we can be assured that the spiritual masters of the faith have something enlightening to say. They are worth reading and meditating upon... forming our hearts... giving us something substantial to feed upon while authentically reflecting the splendor of our faith: Thomas Aquinas, Francis de Sales, John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, John Henry Newman, Benedict XVI (to mention but a few).

Finally, one outstanding quality of heart that characterizes the graces of our metanoia is a magnanimity of spirit that looks beyond the purely practical. Instead of the petulance of those who fret over small, unimportant details, there is a broad-hearted generosity that sees the big picture, that knows how to truly win hearts with lofty ideals and noble actions. This magnanimity (epitomized by the story that began this talk) doesn't need to be in the exclusive domain of the famous and influential. Most often it is seen in ordinary life, in quiet settings, far from the eyes of the curious. It is often manifest by the motherly or fatherly sacrifices that take shape in our homes, or by the random kindnesses of the complete stranger who offers to go 'the extra mile'. Extolled by the sages of antiquity and venerated saints, it makes the world a better place to live in just by the sheer force of its inspiration. To see it in action is to experience something of the joys of heaven where all our self-concerns are finally laid to rest. And, of course, to practice it is to set oneself on the pathway that leads to the Heart of Christ. It is definitely a part of our Easter journey as we strive to configure ourselves, through God's sustaining grace, to the image of our Savior whose pierced heart symbolizes His great-hearted love for creation:

though he was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men... he humbled himself... and God highly exalted him...

[Philippians 2: 6-10]

* quoted from *Faith in Christ and the Worship of Christ*, Ignatius Press, 1986, p. 128.

**see the excellent online article from *First Things* "The New Jansenism: A Pessimism That Would Canonize All," by Jessica M. Murdoch, Feb. 21,

This talk on Sacred Heart spirituality was given in our Gathering Room on March 5th, 2017. If you would like to attend similar presentations by the Sisters, our next talk will be held on Sunday, April 2nd, 2017 at 4:00 p.m.