

# Our Stubborn Refusals

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## Are we Re-Crucifying the Heart of Jesus?

Dear Friends of the Heart of Christ,

Recently I have been reading the new book by Archbishop Charles Chaput of Philadelphia entitled: *Strangers in a Strange Land—Living the Catholic Faith in a Post-Christian World*. The title for this presentation was suggested to me by something the Archbishop wrote in Chapter One of this book. He states that “our stubborn refusal to see anything beyond the horizon of this earthly life fills the air the developed world now breathes.” When we stop to think more deeply about this, we realize how true it is. We know that there are very many people who deliberately refuse to believe in God. (In a 2014 poll, 33% of the world population was estimated to be atheist or not religious.) However, all of us—no matter what our state of life is—can become so immersed in the demands of our daily existence that we often forget about God. We can so easily push aside the teachings of the Lord that ought to fill our minds and guide our conduct for more mundane matters. We are all called to contemplate the divine teachings and works of the Lord that should lift our human understanding and behaviors to a higher level. Yet, many souls do not want to think about these divine precepts, because they do not want them to influence their lives and decision making. They do not want to change because they are too attached to the things of this world. Some who may even consider themselves “spiritual” are often misguided for they stubbornly cling to what they perceive will benefit and empower themselves in *this* world. Their hearts will not open enough to let the Lord pour into them the graces and divine inspirations that the Sacred Heart of Jesus has reserved especially for them.

Clearly, we find ample examples of this kind of thinking popping up before us in the Lenten scripture readings. In them we hear about that stubborn refusal to allow God’s divine plan to prevail over our petty plans and ways of doing things. How often we elbow God out of the picture by our reluctance to open our eyes to his providential designs.

Listening to the Lenten readings the Church has prepared during this holy season, we can’t miss the theme of obstinacy of heart that appears again and again. Take the passages from Exodus (8:15-19) for instance. After repeated warnings, Pharaoh hardens his heart and refuses to listen to God through his servant Moses. To wake Pharaoh up, the Lord sends him one plague after another. As soon as one disaster is under control, Pharaoh returns to his own pattern of self-assurance. Isn’t this the way our human nature reacts to our own dilemmas? We beg for God’s assistance in the midst of crises, remembering the compassion of Christ’s Heart and his promise to be there for us. Yet, when the coast is clear, we go our merry way again, hardly learning the lessons we should from each trial and never grasping that we need to change and adjust our priorities or patterns of living. Our stubborn hearts can blind us to what God is trying to say to us. One may wonder how Pharaoh could be so inane as to witness God’s tremendous power and still not listen to Moses. But Pharaoh, like many of us, has already made up his mind. He can’t conceive of someone who is greater than he is. This stubborn refusal to believe led to a heart so hard that even a major catastrophe couldn’t move it. It took the greatest woe of all—the death of his son—to force him to recognize God’s supreme authority. Even then, he wanted nothing to do with God. And what was the result of this recalcitrance? One sees it clearly—great suffering that descends upon himself and his entire country.

Soon we will be hearing the familiar verses from the sacred scriptures that echo the sufferings of the Lord Jesus Christ. You know the background... Hearts that have become obdurate refuse to believe in the Christ. The particular acrimony of the Pharisees toward Jesus, grieves him exceedingly. Instead of acknowledging the Lord for his miraculous healing powers and authoritative words, they were threatened by his presence and contrived to rid themselves of this agitator. And what was their end? What is the fate that awaits all those who persist in rejecting Christ and his plan of salvation for each of us? It is that God will eventually leave us to our hardness of heart. Only we can admit him into our hearts. Our free-will is not tampered with, but as one of our Marian chaplains sagaciously preached in a recent homily, “If you close your heart to God, there are consequences that go with it.”

As I have already mentioned, I believe that all of us can become so absorbed in our own duties, concerns and ways of doing things that we miss the target, so to speak, of responding to God's special mission or call for each of us. Thinking about this led me to remember two specific events in the lives of the saints. The first is from the life of St. Faustina—Helen Kowalska. In 1924 when Helen was a young woman of about twenty years old, working as a domestic servant in the Polish city of Lodz (the second largest in that country at the time), she was persuaded by her sister Jeanne to go to a fair with her three sisters and a friend. Helen really did not want to go. But since her sister paid for her ticket she acquiesced and went along. She made a pretty picture with her thick braided hair and her pleated pink dress. Heading for the dance floor, it wasn't long before she was approached by a young man for a dance. Helen hesitated, saying that she was a poor dancer. But the young man persisted. A short time into the dance, Helen abruptly stopped and excused herself, leaving the surprised young man and abandoning her sisters and friend, complaining of a headache. Years later she was to write in her diary (#9): "I was at a dance with one of my sisters. While everybody was having a good time, my soul was experiencing deep torments. As I began to dance, I suddenly saw Jesus at my side, Jesus racked with pain, stripped of his clothing, all covered with wounds, who spoke these words to me, 'How long shall I put up with you and how long will you keep putting me off.'"

The second event I would like to relate is from the life of St. Margaret Mary Alacoque. As you read it, consider the similarities in this account taken from her *Autobiography* with the account from above. Our saint writes, recalling her youth in the world: "I still went out of my way to find what I was naturally fond of—pleasure, amusement; but I couldn't enjoy it any longer. I would see a pitiful figure, my Savior, fresh from his scourging. 'Are you really so bent on enjoying yourself? I didn't have a good time on earth. Sorrow—sorrow in all its forms—was the lot I chose, trying to win your heart, because I love you.'" Margaret Mary then explains, "I've tried to hold out against God and put up a long line of barriers to his grace."

Interestingly, these two accounts illustrate that the Lord was experiencing a renewal of his passion sufferings when these two souls ignored his calls for a closer more intimate spiritual life. Yet, they did respond to the Lord after all and gave themselves wholeheartedly to the Heart of Jesus and the mission he had in mind for each of them. What about the rest of us? Does our daily forgetfulness of God's presence, our negligence to return the love of Jesus' Heart and our half-hearted responses to our Christian commitments mean that we might be re-inflicting the pains of Christ's passion upon him again?

In his book that I cited at the beginning of this presentation, Archbishop Chaput periodically mentions the powerful classic by Dr. Scott Peck, *People of the Lie*. Written in 1983, this best-selling book brilliantly delves into the essence of human evil. Evil, according to Peck, tries to appear normal or natural and, therefore, acceptable. Peck makes the distinction between real evil and ordinary sin. It is not their sins as such, Peck explains, that define evil people, but rather it is the subtlety, covertness, persistence and consistency of their sins. This is because the central defect of evil is not solely the sin but the human rejection of recognizing and acknowledging it.

As a consummate director of souls, Archbishop Chaput has much experience with counseling the sinner. He writes, "In discussing *People of the Lie*, it's easy to use the words "they" and "them." But what's bracing about Scott Peck's work is that it implicates all of us and our wider culture. The pretense of goodness, the perversely moralistic scapegoating, the self-deception—these aren't just the sins of "evil" people. They're qualities rooted in our fallen nature and pandemic in a society based on license. We're all, to some degree, "people of the lie."

If that is so, then the Heart of Jesus must be breaking. The Heart of Jesus—this source of fathomless love, sublime love, eternal love—wants to remind all of us how much He loves us. Look what he went through to prove His love for us. So his Sacred Heart must be torn and lacerated to see so many of his creation giving way to Satan, to see on the way to perdition so many souls of priests, of religious, of laity who have failed Him and wandered away from Him. Our sins, our pretenses of goodness, our obduracy of heart to hear and heed His voice, our moral failures and our spiritual apathy are all piercing His Sacred Heart. For all of us whose hearts have turned to granite, the Lord is pleading with us to allow our hearts to be touched by Him and softened and opened. He knows what lies deep in each of our hearts and His Heart bleeds profusely to see we are not what we could or should be. So He is calling to each of us to enter into his Sacred Heart and to feel his wounds, his profound love, and to be transformed in that love. Then we are to reveal this love to all we meet.

I love the sentence by St. Vincent de Paul that goes, "If God is the center of your life, no words are necessary. Your mere presence will touch hearts." If the Sacred Heart of Jesus is the focus of your daily existence, your entire being will radiate his mercy, justice and goodness. Although we as fragile mortals often give in to our lower natures, we can humbly ask the Sacred Heart of Jesus to give us new supple hearts that are truly open to his Heart and that have the courage and honesty to know our sins, to acknowledge them and to strive to do better. This Lenten hymn which we sing during this season astutely expresses the deepest yearnings of our willful human hearts: *Have pity, God of grace, on me, a sinner; My sinful heart in your great love console. Cleanse me, O fount of grace, from sin's defilement; Bathe me, O healing spring, and make me whole. / True hearts alone, O God of truth, delight you; My heart of hearts to truth make ever true. Give me a wiser heart to learn true wisdom; By steadfast love my waywardness undo.*

What does the Sacred Heart of Jesus want from each of us? He desires that we *include* him in our daily activities, that we turn to him in our problems, that we strive to discern what he wants in all the decisions and actions of our lives. May his Sacred Heart rejoice in each of us as we endeavor to give Him the glory this Easter and everyday of our lives. +

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*This talk on Sacred Heart spirituality was given in our Gathering Room on April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2017. If you would like to attend similar presentations by the Sisters, our next talk will be held on Sunday, May 7<sup>th</sup>, 2017 at 4:00 p.m.*