

THE HEARTS that console other hearts

Dear Friends of the Sacred Heart,

In the Litany of the Sacred Heart we find the invocation "Heart of Jesus, Source of All Consolation." Yes, the Heart of Jesus is truly the source of all consolation. What does that mean? If you were asked to respond with the first word that comes into your mind when you hear the expression "consolation," you might answer: comfort, relief, soothing. Or perhaps words like suffering, sorrow, affliction, that connote the opposite of consolation would come to your mind.

The Book of Job, reference for many inspirational Lenten readings, tells us plainly that our life on earth is "filled with many miseries," and so there will always be the need of consolation. The application of consolation would be meaningless if the conditions of pain, suffering, affliction did not exist. Who of us yearns for the consolation of any kind in the mist of luxury, plenty, and good times? It is almost always when we experience affliction that we turn instinctively to our religious beliefs.

In years past I came upon an interesting article entitled "Affliction" featured in a spiritual magazine. In it the author tells of his sudden collapse from a strange, undiagnosed, debilitating disease. His entire life was now completely reoriented by persistent, ever-present pain. Pain that touched body, mind, feelings, spirit, soul. Misunderstood by friends and family, who with baffled medical doctors considered his symptoms psychosomatic, the innocent victim descended into the regions of a personal hell. He related:

"Every aspect of my life was now affected; every pleasure, all comfort had been cut off... Then deep in this darkness, something strange happened. Something stirred. A faint light began glowing. I became aware of a presence in my soul. There was no outward sign, no visible indication. Yet somehow I felt, then I knew beyond doubt that God had drawn dreadfully near. From the start He had given me periodic, but terribly sketchy assurances. But now a budding, yet utterly certain impression had emerged and I knew that God was in the very center of the illness, that He was the fire, it was He burning me alive. I stopped praying for healing. I knew I could not escape: I found I did not want to escape! This was no arbitrary, absurd affliction-- it was the hand of God. Now I saw clearly that my only choice was active to consent, to give myself to the fire, to enter in.

...Then I began to realize that something astonishing had occurred: I was happy. Not happy, really, but at peace. I was calm, at rest, I just knew. I was still as sick as ever, but this knowing consisted in realizing that this affliction, this divine disease, had wounded me perfectly. The wound had become the doorway to God. The work of affliction, its purpose, had arrived. The burning, the pain, the despair and horror and uncertainty had nailed me to the heart of God... a resurrection was underway, a new birth-- indeed, a birth made possible only in the tender hand of affliction."

Dear Friends, our existence on this earth will never be free from affliction. Like this man, we may be faced with the anguish of illness-- in ourselves and in our loved ones. Whatever heartache life has dealt us, whatever absurdity has punctured our world of security, the Heart of Jesus stands by, ready to channel into our lives His unfailing consolation. Jesus, the Consoler, is God. That means that His love and consolations will not be mere words. He is powerful enough to console by actions. His touch heals, changes, transforms. So does his Mother, Mary. We remember that Mary, too, has a special title "consoler of the afflicted" or "consolatrix afflictorum"-- the constant, reliable one who gives direction and points the way. The Blessed One who has a powerful influence with our triune God.

Those of us who like to read about the apparitions of Our Lady will probably be familiar with a very popular one : Our Lady, Untier of Knots. Named after an 18th century Bavarian painting which depicts Mary calmly undoing the knot in a long rope, this gesture caught the attention of Pope Francis when he was a young student studying in Germany. The painting was said to have been commissioned by a nobleman to give thanks to Mary for saving the marriage of his grandfather. As the story goes, the couple were on the verge of separation and went to a Jesuit priest for help. The priest, in turn, prayed before this image of Mary that all the knots in the marriage would be loosed, and, in time, his prayer was answered.

Of course, many such “interventions” of Our Lady can be accounted for. Here is another that comes from the annals of Lourdes and which I'd like to share with you, for it shows so convincingly Mary's special concern for those in need of physical healing and those in need of faith healing... those whose unbelieving hearts refuse to acknowledge God's presence. It is the account of the Nobel Prize winning medical research scientist, Alex Carrel, who with a skeptic's faith journeyed to Lourdes in 1903 to scrutinize the sick to see if their healings were of an authentic nature. He became involved with the case of a Marie Ferrand whose illness of tubercular peritonitis was extremely acute, giving her caretakers almost no hope for her recovery. Nevertheless, she was brought to the baths and not being physically able to be immersed, could only have some of the spring water poured over her abdomen. Seeing no change in her condition after this was done, Carrel left her stretcher and was replaced by a priest. The story, as narrated, continues:

The priest was kneeling down, facing the line of patients and the crowds beyond. He lifted his arms and held them out like a cross. His voice was so raucous, sincere and impassioned that it seemed as if the Virgin could not fail to hear him. 'Holy Virgin, heal our sick,' he cried out. 'Holy Virgin, heal our sick,' the crowd responded with a cry like the rolling of waves. 'Holy Virgin,' intoned the priest, hear our prayers!' Then the priest stood up and said, 'My people, let us lift our arms in prayer!'

A forest of arms was raised. A wind seemed to blow through the crowd; intangible, silent, powerful, irresistible, it swept over the people lashing them, like a mountain storm. Carrel felt its impact...

They stopped near Marie Ferrand's stretcher and leaned against the low wall. She was motionless, her breathing still rapid and shallow; she seemed to be on the point of death.

Carrel glanced again at Marie Ferrand. Suddenly he stared. It seemed to him that there had been a change, that the harsh shadows on her face had disappeared... to him it was obvious that there was a sudden improvement of her general condition... Carrel felt himself turning pale. The blanket which covered Marie's distended abdomen was gradually flattening out. The bell of the basilica had just struck three. A few minutes later, there was no longer any sign of distension in Marie Ferrand's abdomen.

'How do you feel?' he asked her. 'I feel very well,' she answered in a low voice. 'I am still weak, but I feel I am cured.'

Carrel stood there in silence, his mind a blank. This event, exactly the opposite of what he had expected, must surely be nothing but a dream... abruptly, Carrel moved off. Making his way through the crowd of pilgrims whose loud prayers he hardly heard, he left the Grotto. It was now about four o'clock.

The dying girl was recovering. It was the resurrection of the dead; it was a miracle!

[Quoted from the book *Mary: A Marian Anthology* by Patrick J. Murray, cssp; Veritas Publications, 1979, pp. 26-28.]

The message I would like you to take away from this Sacred Heart talk is that the Hearts of Jesus and Mary are consoling hearts. It is unfortunate that we humans often fail to take advantage of this offer of consolation. Instead of seeking our refuge in the Hearts of Jesus and Mary, we are tempted to distract ourselves in the fleeting pleasures of life-- the pursuit of prestige, money, success, or constant activity that only leave our souls feeling empty and disillusioned. These things cannot bring true and lasting consolation because they cannot satisfy the heart that is made by God and for God and finds its truest fulfillment in Him alone. The source of all true consolation is the infinite love of God, and that love burns in the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary. From these holy sources, all can draw consolation, joy, and peace. In the Heart of Jesus, Source of All Consolation, and in the Heart of Mary, Consoler of the Afflicted, our daily calvaries become the sure pathway to our Easter happiness and glory.+ AMEN.

This talk on Sacred Heart spirituality was given in our Chapel on May 1st, 2022. If you would like to attend similar presentations by the sisters, our next talks will be held on Sunday, June 5th, 2022 at 4:00 p.m.