
AT ALL TIMES:

The Heart of Christ: Our Hope, Our Joy

Dear Friends of the Sacred Heart,

When we began this year of 2022, most of us would never have suspected that our world would be exposed to the destructive effects of a major war and its universal repercussions on so many facets of our lives. As humans most of us carry a little pocket of anxiety in our hearts that is filled by hopes and fears of what the future might hold in store for us. If we recall the familiar Christmas carol, O Little Town of Bethlehem, we hear the words: "Yet in thy dark streets shineth, the everlasting light; the hopes and fears of all the years, are met in thee tonight." The birth of Christ, Redeemer of the world, resulted in mixed emotions among men and women. Our God, full of surprises, did not give humankind a savior wrapped in rich array but in swaddling clothes. To many who viewed the event from a practical, natural perspective, this insignificant new born obviously did not assuage fear or offer much hope for a brighter future. It was plain to see that the family was poor, the infant needy, and the lodging accommodations rather pitiful. However, what seemed like an unfortunate event, did ultimately, turn the course of human history in a new direction.

There is much wisdom in the simple saying: "Things are not always what they seem." Experience in our own lives may reveal to us devastating past events that turned into pure gold or agonizing circumstances that proved to be the building blocks that strengthened our character and provided fuel for our growth process. Real life situations do not always end like fairy tales of the 'happily ever after' kind. Yet with a living hope in God whom we know is Love, we need not be overwhelmed by a depressing doom. St. Paul aptly reminds us in his letter to the Colossians: "You will be endowed with the strength needed to stand fast, even to endure joyfully whatever may come, giving thanks to the Father for having made you worthy to share the lot of the saints in light" (Col. 1: 11-12).

We may all be able to resonate with this spiritual insight in our own experiences. For me, there is the remembrance of a friend of mine whose mother had battled with cancer for over a year, reducing her to a mere shadow of her former self. It has been said that a person dies as they have lived. And so this woman who had spent her life selflessly for her family, neighbors, and all who came into her circle of existence passed her last mortal days encompassed by pain... an intense pain that equalled her intense peace. The fruit of her love which was continually given away day after day enveloped her with an unearthly comfort. When the final moment came, she left this life with hope in her heart and a smile on her face.

This reminds me of something else I read about our European monasteries during the air-raids of the second world war. One of our houses was terribly bombed and afterward as the clean-up commenced, it was discovered that the countenances of those who had died were remarkably peaceful. There was no sign of visible terror on their faces and this left an amazing impression on the minds of their rescuers.

In this regard a highly esteemed English physician has noted:

If our treasure was our work, our social position, our personal gifts and achievements, and even our personal relationships, these will all depart, and nothing of substance will be left. There will be no hope because there will be nothing for which to hope. We make our old age in our youth, but few see this at the right time. God is eternally with us, but we so often are far from Him. When we need Him, He is still there, but we cannot come to Him until we have come to see the type of life we have led.

It is almost impossible when speaking of hope not to touch on its opposite expression of depression. Experts define two general levels of depression: the common type in which a person comes face to face with the selfishness and inconsideration of others, and the truly spiritual type in which a great servant of God takes on the sin of the world for its healing. He or she may not even be aware of what they are undergoing, but the markings of the cross are apparent for others to see. The prophet Jeremiah was such a person. From the beginning of his spiritual career to his tragic end, he was subjected to suffering and gloom, carrying out the work of God with a reluctant dedication that he said consumed him. From the pages of Scripture we can listen as he relates his own tale of interior crisis:

All the day I am an object of laughter; everyone mocks me. Whenever I speak, I must cry out, violence and outrage are my message; the word of the Lord has brought me derision and reproach all the day. I say to myself, I will not mention Him, I will speak in His name no more. But then it becomes like a fire burning in my heart, imprisoned in my bones; I grow weary holding it in, I cannot endure it (Jer. 20: 7b-9).

We should note that although Jeremiah's lot was undeniably distressing, he, nevertheless, clung to God's infinite goodness despite the darkness around him. In a subsequent chapter, we find the consoling words: "Cease your cries of mourning, wipe the tears from your eyes. The sorrow you have shown shall have its reward. There is hope for the future, says the Lord" (Jer. 31: 16, 17a).

If it is true that even the good are tempted to a state of hopelessness, then how does one profitably pass through such experience without yielding to despair and utter futility? Various possibilities exist as a means to help us ground ourselves and re-establish ourselves with a hopeful outlook. We can turn to compassionate and understanding family members and friends who have themselves emerged from deep waters or sometimes seek professional counselors who can put us back on track. However, as one seasoned religious writer noted: "Not even the best psychotherapists can liberate our conscious and subconscious psychic life as surely as does a new heart-to-heart relationship with Jesus." The embers of an undying hope that are never extinguished by life's tragedies are fed from the divine furnace of love - the Heart of Christ.

The Litany of the Sacred Heart twice petitions the Heart of Jesus with regard to hope with the invocations: Heart of Jesus, salvation of those who hope in you, and Heart of Jesus, hope of those who die in you. Both serve as an avenue to that ultimate hope which our faith tells us resides in every human heart, the hope of eternal existence. We catch only minute glimpses of what this might mean from the true joys encountered in this life. But these are only insignificant sands compared to the ocean of happiness that awaits us in our heavenly home. What the Heart of Jesus offers us is possession of His very self and this entails unending glory and total perfect love. Binding ourselves to the Heart of Jesus enkindles in our hearts an unflickering hope that burns until the time when only pure love will remain. The Heart of Jesus, Heart where our hope is never left disappointed, is our surety, then, against despair, against meaninglessness, against life's traumas, against impossible odds.

One last offering comes from a short story related to us by an Augustinian priest. He told of one of his former students who had been stationed in Cuba during one of the communist uprisings there. This young man had been brutally arrested and thrown into a deep pit along with several others. Conditions were inhuman. A deeply spiritual person, he turned with all the strength of his soul to Jesus and completely entrusted himself to His loving care. Such a sense of profound sweetness pervaded his being that he later remarked that he could have gladly spent the rest of his life in that pit.

May our own turning to the pierced Heart of Jesus at all times grant us the same full measure of hope and joy. AMEN. +

This talk on Sacred Heart spirituality was given in our Chapel on April 3rd, 2022. If you would like to attend similar presentations by the sisters, our next talks will be held on Sunday, May 1st 2022 at 4:00 p.m.