



HEART OF JESUS: CONSUMING FIRE

by Sister Joan Bernadette

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Dear Friends of the Heart of Christ,

One of the classic statements of Jesus in his revelations to our sister Saint Margaret Mary has to do with his disappointment at the 'lukewarm' response he receives from humankind. Jesus laments in the second revelation that his great overtures of love have met only with ingratitude. "This is," he said, "much more painful to me than all I have suffered in my Passion. If people rendered me some return of love, I should esteem little all I have done for them, and should wish, if such could be, to suffer it over again, but they meet my eager love with coldness and rebuffs."

This month of June, dedicated as it is to the Sacred Heart is another opportunity to experience once again the love of Jesus' heart. Yet tiredness and our daily preoccupations often make it difficult to respond to this tremendous grace. The weight of weariness and indifference sometimes attacks our spirits and leave them in a state of perpetual inertia. We may even seem to stand on the threshold of despair, wondering why our best efforts produce so little good fruit.

Some words of encouragement which have shed light on this dilemma came to me after hearing the life of Saint Teresa of Avila read in our refectory. Teresa, herself, struggled with the human tendency toward mediocrity. In her early years as a Carmelite religious, Teresa came to terms with this obstacle in herself. While in a state of ill health and visiting the home of a beloved uncle, she experienced a spiritual enlightenment. Up until this point, Teresa had not shared her interior thoughts with anyone, but to this favorite uncle, the doors of her soul opened, and she told him "frankly of her struggles, her hopes, her discouragement, the lukewarmness into which she habitually fell back after transports of love and devotion." After hearing what she had to say, her uncle shook his head. "It is essential to pray," he says, "to pray much."

I do pray, Teresa answers.

How do you pray?

She went on to explain that she recited her prayers aloud.

He answers: The only thing that counts is prayer, by which I mean mental prayer, recollection.

He then hands Teresa a book from the shelf in his library which she opens at random.

It reads: Vocal prayer, as thou hast seen, is a petition we make to God to ask him for what is necessary for us.



The second form of prayer, that is without pronouncing the words with the lips, leaves us free so that our heart alone speaks to Our Lord.

The third, which may be termed mental or spiritual, is that in which the highest point of the soul, sustained by love, soars upward to God in the purest and most loving way possible, on the wings of desire. Thus in the first movement we kiss his feet, in the second we kiss his hands, in the third we give him a kiss on the lips.

Finally, he summarizes his thoughts in one line: Unburden your heart by emptying it of everything created, and from everything, extract love.

LOVE EVERYTHING, BUT IN GOD AND FOR GOD.

To stir up the love of God in our hearts it is important to have the determination or will to seek God out, to look for God's presence in everyday events, to believe that our prayers will be answered. These are the dispositions which make up the gratitude which the Heart of Jesus requested of Saint Margaret Mary. The simple words which made up the interior prayer of her heart give us the foundation for such a response: "It is my sincere determination to be and to do all for thy love." A heart which was utterly sincere to serve the Lord and to become like him was enough to intensify her desires and to empower her will. Thus, like St. Teresa, she came to love everything in God and for God.

God's graces are often channeled through small and hidden means. Jesus' influence in the Gospels frequently came through the ordinary...a simple gesture of welcome, a penetrating glance, a cryptic word of counsel. Deep within the commonplace and simple lie a more powerful force for the good. But only those with "ears to hear and eyes to see" will catch the broader implications of Jesus' hidden words and actions. The paradoxical nature of Jesus' teachings confirm that what is of the highest value in the spiritual order is usually not appreciated or understood by human standards. One must probe below the surface to seek God's truth.

Take heed of the words of St. Francis de Sales, "I cannot approve the methods of those who try to reform a person by beginning with external things, such as bearings, dress or hair. On the contrary, it seems to me that we should begin inside. 'Be converted to me with your whole heart,' God said. 'My child, give me your heart.' 'Since the heart is the source of actions, as the heart is, so are they...'" So one need not retire to a desert hermitage or a wilderness monastery to draw near to God. In virtually any circumstance God's presence can be interiorized in the hidden recesses of the heart. Returning frequently to this point of inner contact with the Divine throughout the day is the means we can utilize to call forth the reality of God and to pass that reality onto our unbelieving world.

Some time ago I remember reading a news clipping in the "Dear Abbey" section of our local newspaper. One of Abbey's readers had penned this response to her sage advice. Here is what it said:



Dear Abbey: I have become sickened by all of your references to the ‘Lord’ and praying in your answers to people who are in trouble. Did you ever stop to think that some of these people whom you tell to ‘pray’ might be atheists? I’m sure these references would offend them, as they do me. Remember that there are people in this world who are strong enough to need no imaginary deity to which to cling.
– A Happy Atheist

For a while I kept this clipping in my pocket as a source of meditation. I thought of this person, and the many whose similar sentiments she was voicing and I thought of myself and others who have tried to build the foundations of our lives on God. I asked myself how can God be so present and alive to some and so void and dead to others? I am sure that the thousands who have gone to places of pilgrimage like Lourdes or Fatima and returned radically touched, healed, and converted could offer some poignant reasons why God now takes a central place in their lives. God’s presence is before me every day, not as myth and illusion but as creator, friend, lover, and Savior. That is why throughout the ages of Christianity we encounter ardent spiritualities of the heart. God’s entrance on the human scene comes by way of the heart and if our hearts are not open, ready and desirous of God, then all the initiative of relationship falls on God. God must be the pursuer and sometimes God is the pursuer despite all the obstacles we throw in the way.

The image of the Heart of Jesus as a flaming inferno communicates to us that God’s presence is so abundantly alive and so full of the heat of love that it has burst into a blaze of fire. In her first revelation of the Sacred Heart in 1673, Saint Margaret Mary records: “The Lord said to me, ‘My Divine Heart is so passionately in love with humankind that it can no longer contain within itself the flames of its ardent charity. It must pour them out...’ ”

If God’s love is being poured out with such vehemence, then why do our hearts not sense the wonders of this embracing love? Why do we remain in our cold indifference and inappreciativeness? The answer that has come to my mind is a simple one taken from Psalm 46: “Be still and know that I am God.” The importance of stillness as a stance in recognizing God’s presence cannot be underestimated. God touches the heart in stillness. It is interesting to note that when Jesus wants to silence the presence of demons in the Gospels, his command is “Be still.” In surroundings that vibrate with activity one often becomes disoriented and dislodged from the embrace of God. Stillness is the prelude to perceiving the loving, merciful reality that radiates from the Heart of God.

I do not think we can fully fathom the impact of the short invocation ‘to make our hearts like that of the Sacred One’s heart’ In our Salesian tradition the motto that we use is to ‘Live Jesus.’ It is to mold our hearts into a living, ceaselessly pulsing organ that draws in God’s goodness and life in one movement and in another, breathes forth God’s praise and thanksgiving. This is the means by which the love of God is kindled in our hearts. It is the way the reality of God takes root, becomes anchored, and begins to bear fruit. It is not

hallucination, fantasy, or day-dream, but the stuff of which our hardened hearts get softened by the real power of Divine life and love.



The mark of God's consuming love left on our world is going to be deep and lasting in proportion to the receptivity of human hearts. We make God's love real, by making it visible, viable, and able to be encountered. We are the torch-bearers of the Divine Heart, of God's care and mercy and peace and joy. Let us pray that the fires which God has ignited in creation will not be smothered by doubts and denial but glow with a greater intensity of trust and dedication. In the little corner of our world we can make a positive contribution to spreading the radiance and reality of the Sacred Heart. May our hearts be open and willing to respond.