



## *SINNERS AND THE SACRED HEART*

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*by Sister Judith Clare*

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### **Dear Friends of the Heart of Christ,**

Gazing at me from the moment I awaken each morning are the eyes of an Orthodox saint... from an icon on a small wooden stand opposite my bed. Often I muse that I am probably the only Roman Catholic nun (or one of a very small number) that has a picture of an Orthodox saint in their cell or bedroom. The holy person of my icon is Saint John of Kronstadt, a wonder-working saint from Russia who lived from 1829-1909. Whenever I think about him, I am inspired by his tremendous love for his flock and his incredible selflessness that spared himself nothing in their regard. His time from 5 to 11 a.m. was usually spent preparing and serving the Divine Liturgy. He was absolutely in love with the Eucharist and encouraged his parishioners to more frequent reception. His immense fervor attracted thousands upon thousands of people to his services. The remainder of his day, to about midnight, was spent going from house to house or institutions visiting those who had requested private visits or performing molebens (Orthodox services of intercessory prayer) for the most intimate or desperate needs of his people. So powerful were his prayers, that people noticed that when he prayed, things happened. Consequently, crowds of people were attracted to John's confessional.

One of the most unusual characteristics of St. John of Kronstadt was that he was given the extraordinary permission to confess people en masse. By the latter part of the 1890's confession at his parish outside St. Petersburg during "peak times" involved thousands of people crowded together, shrieking out their sins. Each person still confessed his or her sins individually, but the effect of hearing one's own voice mingled with thousands produced a phenomenal catharsis. Typically, the mass confessions began with St. John addressing the crowds with the words, "Male and female sinners, who are like me..." This profoundly linked the priest with his people. One eyewitness has left this description:

Father John covered his face with his hands, but even behind them the large tears continued to fall down his face onto the cold floor of the church.... He cried, joining his tears with the tears of the people, like a true shepherd of Christ's flock; he grieved and rejoiced in his soul for his sheep. And those lost, sinning sheep, seeing the tears on the face of their beloved pastor and understanding the state of his soul in these minutes, were all the more ashamed of themselves and burst into even greater shrieks, moans, and lamentations, and a pure river of tears of repentance poured forth even more abundantly to the altar of God, cleansing the soiled souls in its stream.

God be Praised!



At the sight of Father John, the crowd reached frenzy; everyone pushed forward, closer to the ambo. They shoved; they climbed up onto the benches, on the steps... Thousands of hands stretched themselves out to him, thousands of mouths cried out his name. And then something awful began. In the darkness the people's tongues were loosened. All the vileness of the human soul flooded out into the open.

"I stole."

"I burned my neighbor's house."

Someone was already ripping her clothing, wailing about having aborted a child.

Such services reminded one of the early Christian sinners who were supposed to acknowledge their sins publicly before the whole congregation before being accepted back into the community of the Eucharist.

I have never forgotten these descriptions in the life of St. John of Kronstadt. From them shine forth the power of repentance and the love and care of an extraordinary pastor of his people. Truly this was a shepherd after Christ's own heart. We have often heard read in our liturgies that Jesus came to call sinners. And we are frequently exhorted with the familiar injunction to love the sinner but to hate the sin. Christ's heart is ablaze with love and forgiveness for all who have lost their way, for all who have fallen from grace, for all who have made mistakes in their lives, and even for all who have grievously transgressed God's laws. What is needed is a sincere acknowledgement of our misdeeds and an earnest attempt to change and do better. Infinite compassion and a peace the world cannot give are awaiting us in the Heart of Christ.

In the messages of the Sacred Heart to St. Margaret Mary, we read this promise: Sinners shall find in my Heart the source and Infinite Ocean of mercy. This is why the Lord has revealed to us the devotion to his Sacred Heart. Herein are the treasures beyond our comprehension which the Lord wishes to give to well-disposed hearts. Herein, sinners can find mercy, repentance, and all that they need to recover their strength and to put them right with God and to walk uprightly again. "By means of the Sacred Heart, "St. Margaret Mary writes, "many will be saved from eternal damnation. He intends to restore life to souls by means of devotion to his Sacred Heart by withdrawing many from the road to perdition and destroying the empire of Satan in souls in order to establish there the empire of his love."

A wonderful example from the life of the modern apostle of the Sacred Heart, Father Mateo Crawley-Boevey-the founder of the Enthronement movement-illustrates the fruit of devotion to the Sacred Heart. It is of the conversion of a national hero of Chile, Admiral La Torre. Father Mateo often socialized with this person who was indifferent to religion. One day, he arrived at the Admiral's house and said, "Admiral, I have come today to give you absolution." The admiral replied laughingly, "So this is a declaration of war in the name of Heaven." "Yes, Admiral," in the name of Heaven,"



replied Fr. Mateo. Then turning to the image of the Sacred Heart, he continued, “Look at this image enthroned in your home. He is your wife’s King; all those who live in this house adore Him on their knees, they live their faith, they obey His laws-all except you! In the name of the Sacred Heart who loves you and who has sent me here to offer you His mercy, surrender to His Heart.” LaTorre, no longer laughing, asked for some time to consider this. To which Mateo replied, “And if death came tonight, would you tell him to come back later because you needed some time to think about it? But right now it is not death that knocks at the door; it is life, Jesus Himself.” The Admiral knelt to confess the sins of his life. Only one year later, Father Mateo assisted him at his deathbed.

Up to this point, we have been considering sin as an objective reality, perceived and delineated by the Church, society and the individual sinner. Sin in the past seemed a concrete and clear-cut transgression against God’s law that society in general recognized and defined. But no more. What in the past had been looked upon as sinful behavior has now in our world of today called forth a response of pride and human prerogative. Consider how our vocabulary has shifted from theological to psychological language. Rarely do we name the wicked actions around us for what they truly are—mysterium iniquitatis, that is the mystery of evil. Instead we have replaced the reality of evil with mere expressions of human tragedy, calling what was once evil, now frustration, unfulfillment, or human deficiencies. Our human family has been described as a therapeutic society where we no longer name the reality of sin for what it truly is but have justified it in the realm of our rights, our needs, and our desires. Moral depravity and outright evil are now considered acceptable and even laudable behaviors.

Our prayers for sinners and for our poor world are desperately needed. In the writings of St. Faustina we find these words from the Lord:

In the Old Covenant I sent prophets wielding thunderbolts to my people. Today I am sending you with my mercy to the people of the whole world. I do not want to punish aching mankind, but I desire to heal it, pressing it to My Merciful Heart. I use punishment when they themselves force me to do so; my hand is reluctant to take hold of the sword of justice. Before the Day of Justice I am sending the Day of Mercy.

My mercy is greater than your sins and those of the entire world. Who can measure the extent of my goodness? For you I descended from heaven to earth; for you I allowed myself to be nailed to the cross; for you I let my Sacred Heart be pierced with a lance, thus opening wide the source of mercy for you. Come, then, with trust to draw graces from this fountain. I never reject a contrite heart. Your misery has disappeared in the depths of my mercy. Do not argue with me about your wretchedness. You will give me pleasure if you hand over to me all your troubles and grief. I shall heap upon you the treasures of my grace.

*Live+ Jesus*



June is the month that the Church dedicates to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. No matter what connotations worldly powers would like us to give to this month, let us keep our eyes fixed on the Heart of Christ. He is inviting all of us, even those who have strayed from his path, to come to Him, to allow the mercy and compassion of his flaming, most lovable and most forgiving heart to wash us clean and to remake us in his own image.

God be Praised!