

# Transcending our Temptations

## *Advice from St. Margaret Mary*

Dear Friends of the Heart of Christ,

During this summer—one of the hottest in recorded history—I have been feeling as though I were immersed in the flames of the Heart of Christ. That is because I have been reading and contemplating the *Letters of St. Margaret Mary Alacoque*. For most of us, Saint Margaret Mary (1647—1690) seems a very distant and obscure figure, one of those hagiographical wonders that are so far removed from our present reality to be almost irrelevant and imaginary. Reading the letters of anyone puts us in touch with a real-live person who existed in time and felt, thought, suffered, struggled, loved and enjoyed themselves just like we do. So reading the letters of this holy soul enabled me to see her as a human being so much like ourselves and in some ways, so much beyond ourselves. One-hundred and forty-two of her letters have been collected and translated into English. Of course, St. Margaret Mary wrote many more than these, for she admits herself that “people write very often.” She stressed the fact that if she answered them all, she would continually be making new acquaintances” (letter 61). The collected letters of St. Margaret Mary present an intimate picture of the thoughts, experiences, attitudes and teachings of this great devotee of the Sacred Heart. Those who recognized her unique spiritual gifts and native intelligence valued her letters as a precious memento of an extremely holy soul who had the ability to offer solid and enlightened spiritual advice. Most of the 142 letters are, as would be expected, to fellow Visitandines in other monasteries, while some are to religious in different orders who were interested in devotion to the Sacred Heart. There are also letters addressed to her brother James, a parish priest and to her brother Chrysostom who was the mayor of Bois-Sainte-Marie, a local French town. Finally, the concluding letters written toward the end of her life in 1690 are addressed to Jesuit Father Jean Croiset who was her spiritual director then. So from this corpus of correspondence over 12 years time, we can gather choice insights into the depths of a heart very close to the Heart of Jesus himself, and we can see what our saint from her privileged position imparted to other people as they lived out their everyday lives.

As one reads through the letters, Margaret Mary makes it abundantly clear that writing these letters was very much against her natural inclinations. She aspired to be forgotten by people—as she expresses it so well in a letter to her former superior Mother de Saumaise, “Nor do I desire any other consolation than that of having any in this world and of living hidden away in Jesus Christ crucified, suffering and unknown so that no one will have any compassion on me nor remember me except to increase my suffering.” It was only out of obedience to her superiors, who recognized the great good her letters would do, that Margaret Mary carried on her correspondence. She was even given the directive not to re-read her letters, lest she be tempted to rip them up or burn them. Oftentimes she apologizes while writing that she does not know if she is repeating herself, for the Lord had obliterated from her memory whatever she was trying to recall as soon as she wrote it down. Declaring that she is only putting down on paper what the spirit of God is guiding her to write, her sentiments are straightforward and, at times, pierce to the heart of the matter without digression, flattery or superficiality. Everything she writes has only one purpose in mind—increasing the honor and glory of the Heart of Christ. Practical concerns too lead to that end and to the soul’s eternal salvation. Even her family members are treated with the same intensity of thought and manner. Yet there is no doubt that her love for them and for all her correspondents for that matter is not based primarily on natural sentiments but on a Christ-like sacrificial love that would suffer anything for their good and their spiritual progress.

In such a limited framework as this talk presents, it is possible to sketch only a few highlights of Saint Margaret Mary's advice to religious, priests and laity. All three groups are represented in her correspondence and although the letters are directed to specific individuals, there are salient pieces of counsel for each state of life in general. Margaret Mary realizes that the graces the Lord has given her are "not so much for myself as for those He would send me to." Therefore, anyone who is sincerely seeking to know and love the Sacred Heart of Jesus and even those who are stumbling along in their spiritual lives looking for a helpful guidepost, will find our saint's words most efficacious. She encourages all of us to "trust in God's goodness" for all we ask. Indeed, we are to seek God's help with confidence, provided that we expect everything from Him alone and provided that we remove any obstacles from our lives that impede the accomplishment of God's most holy will.

**Religious:** The bulk of St. Margaret Mary's collected correspondence is naturally addressed to religious—both superiors and sisters. In her advice to a superior she writes, "We need fear nothing in His sacred arms provided we are diffident of ourselves and look to Him for everything. We ought to fear what comes from human nature. We must not trust it." She continues, "It seems to me that this title *superior* requires that the one who bears it be a living image of Jesus Christ and must represent Him in everything. When He raises anyone to this dignity, He wants of her a complete surrender of all self-interest" (letter 14). At another time she writes, "I beg Him to shower His blessings on your government more and more, so that it may be in His Spirit and according to His designs... If you want to win Him over so that He will take special care of you, abandon yourself completely to His adorable Heart. Put off all self-interests and work most earnestly and lovingly at the task He has given you to do" (letter 18).

Any religious who is serious about her consecrated life will find much food for thought in Margaret Mary's letters. She knows what a lofty state religious are called to and she thus concludes, "Vows add new merit or demerit to our actions." Constantly appealing to the mortification of our frail natures, Margaret Mary exhorts us all to seek higher spiritual levels by "simplifying our lives" and "by controlling the repetitions and reflections of self-love." To a religious she writes, "If you want to live wholly for God and attain that perfection He desires of you, you must make a complete sacrifice of yourself and all that you have, without reserve to His Sacred Heart. Undertake nothing without first asking His counsel and help. In all this, you must follow His inspirations. You must have recourse to it in all your necessities" (letter 28). Privileged recipient of visits from the poor souls in purgatory, Margaret Mary offered many prayers and sacrifices for their relief. Recounting one of these visits, our saint relates how the soul of a fellow religious came to solicit her prayers to alleviate the pains of her intense purification. She informs Margaret Mary that she is primarily suffering for three things: a too great softness and care of her body, a lack of charity and telling tales about others, and for some petty ambitions of hers. Confiding to Mother de Saumaise in a letter dated May, 1688, Margaret Mary admits "I do not remember ever having passed a year like this one as far as suffering is concerned" (letter 86). For Margaret Mary, nothing was too much to bear for the sake of another soul's eternal happiness.

**Priests:** Since Margaret Mary's younger brother James was a parish priest, many words of wisdom passed from her pen to assist him. In a sisterly fashion, she cautions him that to grow in the spiritual life, "It is absolutely necessary to eliminate three things: 1) attachment to earthly things, especially the love of pleasure. Gambling is included in this. 2) anything superfluous in your dress and in your personal habits. What you save in this way you can give to the poor. 3) be as little mixed up in the things of the world as you can" (letter 58). Half apologizing for her frankness in his regard she writes, "Pardon me, my dear brother, for saying all this. It comes from a heart that loves you and earnestly wants you to become holy." However, Margaret Mary knows that all his efforts and sacrifices to be a good priest will be richly blessed by the bountiful Heart of Christ. "Rich too," she emphasizes, "is the reward for despoiling yourself of all these perishable things and for depriving yourself of all these empty pleasures which only bring a thousand pangs of conscience, together with a certain craving to always have more of them. To tell you the truth, you will never find peace or repose until you have made a complete sacrifice of everything to God" (letter 62).

**Laity:** As soon as word reached the town's people of Paray that "the saint is dead," crowds of men, women and children filled the monastery church. Margaret Mary's reputation for holiness had already spread outside the monastery walls and lay people readily acclaimed her sanctity. During her lifetime, the laity often sought her prayers and counsel. In a letter to a Mademoiselle Chamberland at Moulin in 1684, Margaret Mary proposes that she offer to the Lord her heart and affection without reserve. Then she challenges her by asking if she has enough courage to put her words into practice. "Can you die continually to your own inclinations, passions, pleasures," she asks, "in a word to everything that belongs to unmortified human nature, so as to make Jesus Christ live in you by His grace and love?" (letter 25) Then she firmly advocates seeking guidance from a spiritual director. Her constant instructions call for simplicity, straightforwardness and sincerity. She abhors subterfuge, dissimulation and exaggeration.

Letters to her brother who holds the office of town mayor are affectionate but always have a spiritual tone. Saint Margaret Mary takes an interest in the lives and activities of her brother and his family. She laments their trials, encourages their devotion to the Sacred Heart, promises them Our Lord's blessings for all their efforts to love and honor his Sacred Heart, sympathizes with their griefs and illnesses. But the spiritual must come first and their submission to God's will whether it be sickness or business upheavals must be endured with patience and trust. Assuring her brother of her prayers for his sick wife, she writes, "Do not lose courage. Your sufferings borne patiently are worth a thousand times more than any other austerity." "Though God is willing to save us, He wants us on our part to contribute something, and without our cooperation He will do nothing" (letter 120).

Because Saint Margaret Mary walked along the path of suffering and humiliation during her earthly life, her words have a distinct power to address our own personal temptations and sufferings. She understands the human condition, but her unique relationship with the Divine Heart of Jesus gives her a perspective that challenges and lifts us to a higher level of living. May our saintly Sister who knows our hearts so well intercede for each of us and bring us and our loved ones closer to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. +

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*This talk on Sacred Heart Spirituality was given in our Gathering Room on October 3<sup>rd</sup> 2010. If you would like to attend similar presentations by the Sisters, our next talk will be held on Sunday, November 7<sup>th</sup> at 4:00 p.m.*