

Control or Surrender

How do we respond to the Heart of Jesus?

Dear Friends of the Heart of Christ,

As I begin this reflection for the official launching of the Lenten season, I would like to share with you some thoughts garnered from a story I recently read in the liturgical guide, *“The Word Among Us.”* This story is of a typical working woman, who among her many responsibilities as a wife, mother and schoolteacher, found little quiet time to pray and think about the things of God. Her busy, non-stop daily schedule made it extremely challenging to find the stillness needed for deeper prayer. Realizing that if she did not purposely create some quiet time for God, she would never find an opening for prayer. Ultimately, she decided to talk with her husband and made an arrangement with him that after she returned from work, she would retreat to the bedroom and spend twenty minutes of undisturbed time in prayer each day. Initially, it was difficult to read a passage from scripture and then sit quietly to meditate on it. Random thoughts and anxious feelings cruised through her. She was also preoccupied by a family problem. Yet after a time, she began to develop a sense of peace and found she could put the issue aside. Slowly, God began to show her, frequently through the spiritual readings that she chose by chance, “how I was trying to control the situation instead of surrendering it to him.”

Once the woman realized this, she made every effort to surrender her problem to the Lord. The result, she says, was that she moved from being frazzled to being calmer. Now she was sleeping better, could think more clearly, and declared that she was able to handle divisive situations with a wisdom that left her a bit bewildered. “Where did that come from?” she wondered. But it was the Lord working in her as she spent more time resting in the presence of God. She asserts, “I was taking time out for the Lord, and he was changing me!”

How many of us—whether we live in the everyday world, in monasteries, in rectories or wherever—can relate to the human propensity to control a situation instead of surrendering it to the Lord? Even the great saints were tempted to resort to this tactic when they did not understand what the Lord was doing... Take St. Peter for example. Recalling the Gospel passage from Matthew (16:23) and Mark (8:33) we may wonder why Jesus so harshly responded to the chief of apostles, saying “Get behind me, Satan!” The reason for this rejoinder, so out of character for the gentle Jesus, must have deeply disturbed the Lord. Take a closer look at this passage. We see that Jesus had just plainly spoken to his disciples for the *first time* about his plan to go to Jerusalem where he would suffer, be killed and then three days later be raised to life again. This information clearly shocked the apostles, especially Peter, who in the previous Gospel paragraph had pronounced Jesus to be the Messiah, the Son of the living God. The Lord had blessed him for this profound declaration, calling him the rock upon which his church would be built. Now Peter takes the Lord aside to rebuke him. “Heaven forbid,” he says, “This is not going to happen to you!” Doesn’t Peter sound like he’s desperately trying to control the situation? He simply could not reconcile his views of a conquering Messiah with the suffering and death Jesus had predicted for himself. Peter, the rock, thinks he knows better than God incarnate and protests Jesus’ fatalistic mindset. Falling into the trap of putting his plans before God’s plans, Peter tries to control Jesus, not surrender to him. Unwittingly, Peter is suggesting that Jesus be diverted from his heavenly mission of salvation. Peter is doing the devil’s bidding, not God’s. Jesus uses shock treatment to wake him up!

If you were listening to today’s Gospel for the First Sunday of Lent, you heard a very similar response from the Lord in his conversation with Satan. The tempter presented Jesus in the wilderness with an array of earthly enticements—power, riches, influence. The reason for this display is, of course, to deflect Jesus from the cross, from fulfilling his Father’s will. Finally, Jesus declares, “Get away, Satan!”

How natural it was for the pragmatic Peter to set his mind on earthly considerations and values. However, Peter had the wrong perspective and was inadvertently being influenced by Satan. O, how easy it is for each of us to unwittingly become the spokespersons and co-workers for Satan’s designs. This happens so naturally when we focus on our own advancement, our own

interests, our security, our plans rather than the things of God and God's plans. The world offers us many alternative lifestyles and even many convincing but false spiritual pathways. So beware! As one spiritual writer has put it, "The devil's main trick is to get otherwise godly, committed people to ignore what God wants in order to advance what they want. Almost always, that never involves the cross. It never involves dying to self."

When the Lord makes some reproach to the saints, to St. Gertrude or to St. Margaret Mary for example, he often laments their lack of abandonment to his holy will. We can detect this in the life of Saint Margaret Mary, who was privileged to receive in her lifetime (1647—1690) about forty revelations from the Sacred Heart of Jesus. The Lord carefully prepared her for her great mission through suffering, prayer, and special guidance. Her sufferings were to continue to the end of her life. But shortly before her death, she wrote that she had finally understood what the Lord expected of her when he said to her, "Let me do it." She explains, "The Sacred Heart will do everything for me if I let him. He shall will, he shall love, he shall desire for me and make up for my faults." In other words, what the Sacred Heart desired most from our saint—and from all of us, really—was the practice of surrender to his Most Sacred Heart. He wanted his divine power to work through her, with as little resistance as possible. No longer would she think with her own intelligence, but with God's wisdom, no longer would she see things according to her own limited perception, but she would see things as God sees them, no longer would her heart love according to its capacity, but she would love how the Heart of Jesus loves, and detest what he detests.

The Sacred Heart will do everything for me if I let him... And there's the rub. Do we really want to surrender, even to the Lord Jesus? Sounds scary, doesn't it... What will happen to us if we dare do such a thing? Will we have to give up our comfortable lifestyle, our positions of influence, our ways of doing things, our health, our addictions, the power we have over ourselves and others?

In an article entitled *Abandonment to Jesus*, the French priest and author Father Jean D'Elbée makes some provocative points about the spiritual life. His words invite us to make a self-examination of our spiritual habits. Do we have a disposition to belong to Jesus more than ever, to accomplish his will, to know him and make him known, to love him and make him loved more? He writes, "We understand now why so many Communion—those Communion which transform us into Him—do not bring us all the supernatural fruits they could. We open our arms to Him, yet we close the doors of our intelligence, of our will, of our heart, by not living in this abandonment. We bid Him come, but we do not permit Him to enter. But if, in receiving Him, we grant Him, by perfect abandonment, all the controls, all the keys to the house, that He may be Master in us with full liberty to act, then oh! what marvels will His omnipotence not accomplish in our souls in the service of His love!"

If you were to read the letters of St. Margaret Mary Alacoque (those, at least, translated into English) you would find numerous references to the practice of abandonment to the Sacred Heart that she advises to an array of her spiritual correspondents. Priests, religious, laity sought and received her direction and words of wisdom from a heart totally given over to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. To her brother, the mayor of a small French town who begs prayers for his suffering wife, our saint counsels:

All that God wants of her and of you is abandonment to His will, and that you bear these ills patiently and meekly. You must not let yourself be carried away by curiosity. This does not please Him, nor is it in my power to give you satisfaction in this matter. (*Her brother wanted to know if his wife would be cured or if her illness would last a long time. Since Margaret Mary's prayers had on a previous occasion obtained the cure of her priest brother, the family had great confidence in her intercessory power with God.*) Since it is the will of God that she bear her illness with patience for her salvation, it is in vain that you seek human remedies. They will be of no avail, for no one can resist the will of God. It must always be fulfilled whether we like it or not. In short, this poor sick woman's salvation is bound up with this affliction. It is up to her to make good or bad use of it. She should not have to be told whether it will last a long time or a short time but let that remain hidden in God. She must make the sacrifice of her life to Him, so as to give it to Him whenever it shall please Him. I urge her with all my heart and with tears to do this... He has sent her this sickness as a mark of His love and to save her... Where there is question of salvation one must do and suffer, sacrifice and abandon all. (Letter #120)

These sentiments are forthright and sincere. Margaret Mary could only express the truths and insights she received from God. Though on a human level, she could not report that there would be the satisfying cure of the body; on the spiritual plane, God was asking this woman's abandonment into His hands for the good of her eternal soul. The Lord has never promised that he would provide good health and boundless wealth as a reward for our fidelity. What he has promised is to be with us always, especially in our struggles, our heartaches and the disappointments of life. We do not have to carry these burdens alone. The Heart of Jesus intensely desires to share them with us and he will profusely repay our faithfulness in due time. As St. Ignatius of Loyola reminds us, "Few souls understand what God would accomplish in them if they were to abandon themselves unreservedly to Him and if they were to allow His grace to mold them accordingly."

As I prepared this reflection I came across an article from the website: *Integrated Catholic Life* (integratedcatholiclife.org). This site promotes the integration of faith, family and work. The co-founder of the site Randy Hain confesses that he was a man who dealt with life's challenges as they came. He was in control. But God had other plans for him. Now he concedes, "All I can share with you is when I put my pride aside and humbly surrendered to His will, the Lord gave me strength and a sense of peace which I still feel to this day." May the Heart of Jesus grant to us all that deep sense of peace and inner strength—even amid the confusion of our world, our church, our families and communities—when we surrender ourselves and all our cares into his loving hands. +

This talk on Sacred Heart spirituality was given in our Gathering Room on March 5th, 2017. If you would like to attend similar presentations by the Sisters, our next talk will be held on Sunday, April 2nd, 2017 at 4:00 p.m.