

THE SACRED HEART as divine artist

Dear Friends of the Sacred Heart,

Whenever the month of August rolls around I always think of our move to the Berkshires from our former home in Wilmington, Delaware. This year will mark our twenty-fourth anniversary... hard to believe how fast the time has passed! One of the things that continues to amaze me about our coming to Tyringham is our immersion in beauty. Yes, a natural beauty that is a daily reminder of God's glorious creation and a neighborly reminder, too, that we live so close to a world famous musician and a renowned liturgical arts designer "just down the street." For us it seems most fitting that God's providential ways planted us where we can quench our thirsty contemplative spirits in one of the most wonderful gifts from the Lord's sacred heart: the eternal splendor of divine beauty.

Perhaps in our busy lives with so many demands on our shoulders, this sense of wonder which is an avenue to contemplative prayer gets mostly overlooked. Even in monasteries, the humdrum of routine can bear down upon our consciousness, eclipsing the surprises and joys that await the attentive listener, watcher, dreamer. I think of something Saint Teresa of Avila once said: "I found gazing at fields, water, or flowers a great help, for they spoke to me of the Creator, and served as a book in bringing me to a state of Recollection..." It is certainly true that the monastic founders of old searched out places of great earthly beauty, places where the human soul could find a point of transcendence, knowing that something and Someone more alluring than what the eye or ear could feast upon, was accessible to them (if they would only seek it).

From my place sitting in our choir stalls during the chanting of the Divine Office, I have a constant view out our big picture window that runs along the ambulatory of our church. One's gaze often catches wondrous sights: the pink-tinted clouds of a breaking dawn, the quick flight of birds, the unexpected emergence of a rainbow, and, of course, the changing landscape of the seasons, with the adjacent hills decked in white, or browns, or deep blues, or the red, orange, and yellow hues of autumn. The majesty of the Lord which we sing about in the psalms is visibly manifest in a mere lifting of the eyes. There are also other wonders that appear less predictably, though they are all manifestations of the nearness of the Divine who wishes to refresh our journey to his Sacred Heart with the delights of his creative artistry.

Reading the life of Saint Margaret Mary one comes across an often-told story associated with her early days as a religious. The saint is being given advice as to how to conduct herself at prayer and her novice mistress recommends that she place herself before the Lord as a "blank canvas." Surely, here is a reference to the Divine Artist who must have the freedom to create his divine work upon the soul of his beloved without any hindrance. Margaret Mary must have taken this counsel seriously to heart. She begins to make herself totally available to the creative action of the Master so that everything which has been "painted" upon her soul up to that point is erased (by renunciation), and offered anew, like a fresh canvas, to her Lord. The more she opens her heart and soul unconditionally to her God, the greater the graces the Sacred Heart pours into her being, re-fashioning her into a chosen vessel for his glory.

As with all creative endeavors, there are periods of seemingly low productivity. I recall (as a former art major) that it seemed to take six or seven tries before something of value began to emerge in my assignments. One thing would fail to work out for some reason or another, and then after several aborted attempts, a small success would result. Rarely would there be instantaneous satisfaction, only the hint that something pleasing to the eye might be in the making. One learned patience with the process and the hope that the final product would be worth the hours spent in the time and effort expended. A good analogy,

I think, that can be applied to our spiritual quest as well. It takes great patience and fortitude to continue in the constant practice of virtue, especially when the world in which we find ourselves doesn't value any of it. So many good people resist the overtures of divine beauty that present themselves, turning away from a deeper awareness that it is God's hand at work in the world around them. That one step further - to acknowledge the Creator with creation - seems to constitute the perennial dilemma of our age.

Then there is what I like to think of as "hidden beauty." One has to have the right kind of interior lenses to see the worth of this kind of loveliness for it is truly a matter of the heart, a kind of deep intuitive discernment that grasps what is not readily apparent. St. Francis de Sales definitely had this gift of seeing through to the "essence" for his powers of human assessment went beyond what met the eye alone. He reminds others through his letters and counsels that it is the heart that matters and that true re-formation begins in the hidden recesses of our interior spirit. So, he cautions, be careful not to judge by the exterior, but look to the inner workings of the spirit. In this way you will encounter the real place of beauty and transformation, the unchanging point of contact that does not shift with the "swaying sands of time."

Of course, it is here in the human heart, that the Divine Artist, uses his most powerful strokes to create the image of Himself upon our interiors. He imprints in our being the reflection of goodness, incarnated by his Son, whose features stir our faculties to devotion, adoration, worship, imitation. He uses us as the medium of His great attributes of love and mercy especially when we proffer ourselves as instruments of his providence. He masterfully weaves our lives into the fabric of his inscrutable wisdom for Creation, if only we would allow the threads of our wills to be joined to His. This is what He has done time and again throughout history, for He, above all is a Creator, whose creative love, flows unceasingly from His Divine Heart to ours.

It is interesting in the world of art dealership to learn how the true value of art works are appraised. For it is not necessarily the inherent qualities of a piece of art that determine its monetary value in the long run, but who possessed the work in the history of its existence. When we transfer this understanding to the realm of the sacred, how precious we must consider the human heart as a divine work of art made in the image and likeness of the One, True God. And, yet, we need to surround ourselves with visual reminders of that transcendence. Churches that are devoid of beauty, that are stripped of anything that might lift the eye and heart upward, only negate the purpose for which they are created. So, too, our homes which can serve as "wayside stations" help us orient ourselves to God's presence. How right the castles of old were to incorporate a chapel into their domains where the aura of something supernatural could permeate their everyday activities. These constant visual reminders communicate to us the sense that God is in our midst and that his grace is fortifying our hours with heaven's blessings even in the monotony of our everyday labors.

The Sacred Heart, I believe, is continually "bombarding" us with signs of his love, if we would only have the eyes to see and the awareness to catch the wonder of his creative touches that "flit" through the ordinary moments of our day. He is, of course, present in the Holy Eucharist where we can intimately take Him into ourselves as food to nourish us on the road to paradise, but, we must not fail to perceive his calls to us that come when we encounter the amazing variety of his creativity. God is enhancing our journey to his heart with every colorful leaf, with the sounds of nature's creatures, with the shapes of clouds and waterfalls. He is there, loving us, in the fireflies, in the hummingbirds, yes, even in the mosquitoes, if we but turn our inner gaze toward his divine goodness and trust that all is bringing us closer to Him.

There is a wonderful hymn which we sing in our Morning Prayer (on Sundays) that captures God's never-ending act of creation breaking through the mysteries that we hear about in our faith. The second verse is most poignant for it says:

**Yet God is recreating More than our inner world: Look up beyond the planets
Where galaxies are swirled. Look out and see how often Surprising love is shown.
Christ is at work re-shaping Both stars and hearts of stone.**

[from *Hymnal of the Hours*. 1989, GIA Publications]

The heart of our God will never stop His divine advances on our hearts. After all, as the English poet Francis Thompson has rightly surmised, He is the "hound of heaven," forever on the pursuit of the return of our love for His and wooing us with the marvels of His divine artistry. +

This talk on Sacred Heart Spirituality was given in our Gathering Room on August 13th, 2017. If you would like to attend similar presentations by the sisters, our next talk will be held on Sunday, October 1st, 2017 at 4:00 p.m.