



FIRE AND THORNS

A RETREAT GUIDE ON THE SACRED HEART OF JESUS

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INTRODUCTION

Retreat Overview

In the year 1932, the entire world was in an upheaval. Europe was still desperately trying to recover from the First World War. Revolutions and uprisings were exploding in South and Central America and parts of Asia. Famine was devastating Joseph Stalin's Communist Soviet Union. A bloody civil war had just ended in Mexico, and one was soon to begin in Spain.

Japan annexed Manchuria and was threatening the balance of power in the eastern Pacific. Mussolini was in power in Italy. Adolph Hitler was advancing to power in Germany. And the stubborn, worldwide Great Depression was continuing to devastate the international economy.

That year, Pope Pius XI wrote an encyclical entitled "Caritate Christi Compulsi," or, in English: "Constrained by the Charity of Christ." In this letter, the Pope interpreted the signs of the times, and he described the world situation as more dire than in any period since Noah's flood. He wrote:



Anyone who considers carefully the prolonged and bitter series of sufferings, the unhappy heritage of sin, whereby, as by so many stages, we mark the course of fallen man in this mortal pilgrimage, can hardly find any occasion since the Flood, when the race of man was so deeply and so commonly tried by so many and such great distresses of body and of mind as those which we lament to see in the present troubles.

— Caritate Christi Compulsi, 2

And what was the Pope's proposed solution to this cataclysmic situation? Did he call for political action, economic reform, and shrewd diplomacy? No. Not just those kinds of things. Instead, he went right to the heart of the matter — to Jesus' Sacred Heart, in fact.

In that encyclical, he called on Catholics throughout the world to return in prayer and penance to that symbol and source of all saving grace. He assured the suffering multitudes that:



The divine Heart of Jesus cannot but be moved at the prayers and sacrifices of His Church, and He will finally say to His Spouse, weeping at His feet under the weight of so many griefs and woes: "Great is thy faith; be it done to thee as thou wilt" [Matthew 15:28].

— Ibid. 34

It may seem like a strange solution to us. But he wasn't alone in making that appeal. Other popes who had to face the unprecedented challenges of the modern world did the same thing.

- Pius IX had made the liturgical celebration of the Sacred Heart universal, for the entire Church, in 1856.
- Leo XIII had arranged for a formal consecration of the entire world to the Sacred Heart in 1899.
- Pius XII invoked the Sacred Heart at the outbreak of World War II, and devoted a lengthy encyclical of his own to its devotion at the dawn of the terrible Cold War just a few years later.

And in that encyclical, he described the Sacred Heart Devotion as absolutely central to the life of the Church and of every Christian. Here are his words:



We do not hesitate to declare that devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus is the most effective school of the love of God; the love of God, we say, which must be the foundation on which to build the kingdom of God in the hearts of individuals, families, and nations.

— Haurietis Aquas, 123

We have all seen pictures and sculptures of the Sacred Heart of Jesus — not all of which are exactly artistic masterpieces. Some of us may have even consecrated ourselves or our families to the Sacred Heart. And yet, I think it's safe to say that most of us, here in the twenty-first century, feel that we don't fully understand either the beauty and the power of this devotion, or how to effectively plug into it in our daily lives.

This Retreat Guide, *Fire and Thorns*, will try to fill that gap. We will take our cue from the Pope Benedict XVI's explanation of Sacred Heart Devotion as including three dimensions:

- In the first meditation, we will look at how the symbolism of the Sacred Heart invites us to recognize God's personal and passionate love for each one of us.
- In the second meditation, we will look at how that symbolism invites us to welcome God's personal love into our hearts.
- And in the conference, we will get practical and look at how Our Lord invites us to respond to this life-giving love.

Before diving in, let's take some time to activate our awareness of God's presence. He is here with us right now, looking forward to spending this time with us, and eager to grant us the graces we need to grow spiritually.

Let's tell him we believe in that. And let's ask him to bless this retreat, and to help us learn the precious lessons that he wants to teach us through fire and through thorns.

FIRST MEDITATION

What is a "Devotion"?

To understand devotion to the Sacred Heart, we have to start by understanding what we mean by "devotions" in general.

God is infinite; he exists outside the boundaries of time and space. But he has revealed himself to us inside those boundaries. That's what the Incarnation was all about: God became one of us so that he could rescue us from sin and win over our friendship by speaking our own language.

By becoming man, Jesus translated the beauty and power of divine things into the material realities of human existence: the spiritual entered into the material. And this is why, in the life of the Church, we have such a rich and varied expression of God's greatness.

We don't just have blank walls and absolute silence. No: we have the sacred scriptures, we have liturgical rituals and ceremonies, we have religious art and music and architecture, we have religious orders and other associations and movements, and we have all the saints who have gone before us throughout the centuries.

It's hard for any one person to drink all of that in. So what usually happens is that as we go through our Christian journey, particular aspects of this vast treasury of faith capture our attention.

The Holy Spirit will draw us closer to God by drawing our attention to particular facets of our faith, in accordance with our own needs, personalities, and sensitivities. These will speak to us about God, in a sense, enlightening us and encouraging us in our own efforts to follow Jesus and his teachings.

And so, it often happens that we develop or experience a special resonance with certain prayers or saints or liturgical feasts, and as we dedicate ourselves more ardently to God through those things, God uses them to

foster our spiritual growth. That special attraction and dedication to particular aspects of the treasure of our faith is what we mean by "devotions."

FIRST MEDITATION

The Uniqueness of Devotion to the Sacred Heart

Among the many devotions that have developed throughout the history of the Church, devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus is completely unique. This has been made clear in the various encyclicals that different popes have written about the topic.

Pope Pius XI, for example, explained,



Devotion to the Sacred Heart is the very epitome of our religion, and opens the way to a more perfect life.

– Miserentissimus Redemptor, 3

More recently, Pope Benedict XVI put it like this:



... the devotion, which is totally oriented to the love of God who sacrificed himself for us, has an irreplaceable importance for our faith and for our life in love...

– Letter to Fr. Kolvenbach, 15 May 2006

Why is this devotion so central, so unique, so "irreplaceably important" for us and for the whole Church?

To answer that question, we have to understand what the word "heart" really means in the language of the Bible. It means much more than just passing sentiments or even deep feelings. The Bible mentions the heart more than a thousand times. And every time, it is referring to the very center of the person, the core of a person's identity.

Here is how the Catechism describes it:



The heart is the dwelling-place where I am, where I live; according to the Semitic or Biblical expression, the heart is the place "to which I withdraw." The heart is our hidden center, beyond the grasp of our reason and of others... The heart is the place of decision, deeper than our psychic drives. It is the place of truth, where we choose life or death. It is the place of encounter... it is the place of covenant.

– CCC 2563

In Biblical terms, that's the heart: the hidden center of the person. And so, if we really want to get to know someone, they have to open up their heart to us; if they don't, we may get to know things about them, but we will never really get to know them.

And now, here is the amazing thing: God himself, the creator of the universe, infinitely wise and powerful, has opened his heart to us: this is the very basis of devotion to the Sacred Heart.

While we were still sinners, still rebelling against God's plan for our lives, he took on human nature through the Incarnation of the Eternal Word in Jesus Christ, and he revealed his heart, the very center of his divine person, the very core of his identity. What does this mean?

It means that God wants to be known by us! He wants to enter into relation with us! He doesn't stay aloof and distant! He comes to us, he opens himself up to us, inviting us to get to know him.

As St. John put it at the beginning of his Gospel:



And the word became flesh, and made his dwelling among us.

– John 1:14, NABR

The Greek word translated into English as “made his dwelling” literally means “pitched his tent.” In the Old Testament, God sent messengers, kings, prophets to his Chosen People. But now, in Christ, he has come himself.

Devotion to the Sacred Heart, then, is devotion to the very essence of God, to the deepest core of the divine nature, to God's most intimate identity. In a very real sense, devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus is devotion to God himself, as he has chosen to reveal himself to us.

And that is why Pope Pius XI can call this devotion the “epitome of our religion,” and why Pope Benedict XVI can describe it as “irreplaceably important.” In another discourse Pope Benedict XVI put it like this:



In the pierced heart of the Crucified, God's own heart is opened up; here we see who God is and what he is like. Heaven is no longer locked up. God has stepped out of his hiddenness.

– The Spirit of the Liturgy, p.48

We could never have conceived of this devotion if God hadn't decided to reveal himself to us, to come down to our level and enter into a personal relationship with us by becoming one of us.

The mere fact that God has opened his heart to us, has invited us to get to know him and to enter into a personal, intimate relationship with him, gives us the first dimension of devotion to the Sacred Heart: a willingness to accept this amazing invitation.

This is the first level of symbolism that we find in this devotion: the symbolism of the heart itself, as the center of a person's being. Jesus, by opening up to us the heart of God, is showing us that God longs to live in a personal intimate relationship with us, with each and every one of us.

No other religion in all of human history has this conception of God: only in Christianity does God love us so wildly that he actually becomes one of us in order to open up his heart in a relationship of intimate friendship.

Here's how the Catechism puts it, when it comments on Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well:



... Christ comes to meet every human being. It is he who first seeks us and asks us for a drink. Jesus thirsts; his asking arises from the depths of God's desire for us... God thirsts that we may thirst for him.

– CCC 2560

FIRST MEDITATION

Conclusion & Further Reflection

In the next meditation, we will look beyond the mere fact that God has chosen to open his heart to us; we will look at what that heart is like, at what Jesus has revealed about his heart, about the core of his identity.

But for now, take a few minutes to consider the first dimension of this devotion, the dimension of God's desire to be known, of his invitation to enter into a deep, intimate, personal relationship with him.

Ask yourself: Am I really willing to take the risk of looking into the heart of God, to the very depths? Jesus hopes you are, and so do I.

Questions for Personal Reflection or Group Discussion

- 1 When have I experienced, personally, God's desire to be known by me? In other words, when have I felt his invitation to look into his heart? How did I respond?
- 2 God has opened his heart to me, and he keeps it open, in Jesus. To what extent do I really open my heart to God in return? What fears do I have that tend to keep me from opening myself completely to him?
- 3 In the past, what devotions, if any, have helped me grow in my relationship with God? Can I express in my own words the difference between other devotions and this devotion to the Sacred Heart?

Biblical Passages to Help Your Meditation



On the last and greatest day of the feast, Jesus stood up and exclaimed, "Let anyone who thirsts come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as scripture says: 'Rivers of living water will flow from within him.'"

– John 7:37-38, NABR



All you who are thirsty, come to the water! You who have no money, come, buy grain and eat; come, buy grain without money, wine and milk without cost! Why spend your money for what is not bread; your wages for what does not satisfy? Only listen to me, and you shall eat well, you shall delight in rich fare. Pay attention and come to me; listen, that you may have life.

– Isaiah 55:1-3, NABR



Do not work for food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him the Father, God, has set his seal.

– John 6:27, NABR



Does not Wisdom call, and Understanding raise her voice? On the top of the heights along the road, at the crossroads she takes her stand. By the gates at the approaches of the city, in the entryways she cries aloud: "To you, O people, I call; my appeal is to you mortals. You naive ones, gain prudence, you fools, gain sense. Listen! For noble things I speak; my lips proclaim honest words... Take my instruction instead of silver, and knowledge rather than choice gold. For Wisdom is better than corals, and no treasures can compare with her."

– Proverbs 8:1-6, 10-11, NABR

SECOND MEDITATION

Symbols of Love

In the conference, we will spend some time reviewing the history of the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. But right now, we are going to jump into the middle of that history.

In the late 1600s, Jesus gave a series of special revelations to St. Margaret Mary Alacoque, who was a nun in the Visitandine convent of Paray-le-Monial, in Burgundy, France. In one of these revelations, Jesus gave St. Margaret Mary a vision of his heart. Here is her description of what she saw:



The divine heart was represented to me as upon a throne of fire and flames. It shed rays on every side brighter than the sun and transparent as crystal. The wound which he received on the cross appeared there visibly. A crown of thorns encircled the divine heart, and it was surmounted by a cross.

It is interesting to note that in this particular apparition, St. Margaret Mary wasn't given a vision of Jesus with his heart exposed, but only of the heart itself. It's as if Jesus wanted to focus all attention just on this, his heart, the central core of his identity.

And each of the four symbols that are connected with his heart in that vision reveal to us different aspects of that core identity. Together, they answer the questions: Who is God? What does he most care about? What is the center of his personality? How can we love him?

So let's take a look at each of these four symbols that Jesus himself chose to use in order to open his heart, his very self, to us.

SECOND MEDITATION

The Throne of Fire and Flame

St. Margaret Mary saw the Sacred Heart of Jesus enthroned upon fire and flames. In fact, the heart itself seemed to be on fire, spreading rays of brilliant light, brighter than the sun and as transparent as crystal.

In the Bible, fire is always associated with God's active, saving love:

- When Moses encounters the burning bush; when God reveals his law on Mt. Sinai;
- when the pillar of fire leads the chosen people through the wilderness; when fire consumes Elijah's offering during the drought;
- and most especially when the Holy Spirit comes to the Apostles at Pentecost, descending upon each of them as tongues of fire.

And Jesus himself even described his mission of redeeming love as one of spreading a fire when he told his followers:



I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing!

– Luke 12:49

What does this symbol, this heart on fire, tell us about our God? That his heart, the very deepest core of his divine identity, is love — burning, passionate, active, transforming love for each and every one of us.

St. John the Evangelist put it like this in his First Letter: “God is love” (1 John 4:8). This is God's identity: *love*. This is why God is a singular divine nature, but at the same time a Trinity of Persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit united in an eternal exchange and relationship of life-giving love.

Maybe you are used to hearing this; but that doesn't make it any less amazing. Picture that heart, enthroned on a blazing fire, brighter than the sun, shining out in every direction, seeking to spread its light and warmth everywhere.

Now, here on earth, or anywhere in the physical universe for that matter, fires need fuel. We have to feed a fire with wood, or coal, or something.

Material fires spread and transform whatever they touch, but they will go out if they don't have enough fuel. Where is the fuel in the fire of the Sacred Heart?

It is the heart itself; the very core of God's identity is the fuel. This flame can never go out; this fire can never die; the eternal, infinite, everlasting nature of God is this burning love.

When we approach God in prayer and in the sacraments, this is what he wants us to experience, this burning love. We all know what it's like to sit around a campfire with good friends. The fire keeps us warm and gives us light. We feel its comfort; it cooks our food; it brings us together to enjoy each other's company.

That's what Jesus wants to be for us, if only we will let him: he wants to be warmth in this cold world, light in our darkness, comfort in our sorrows and loneliness, nourishment for our needy souls.

This is why one of the Biblical passages most often associated with the Sacred Heart of Jesus is the famous saying from Matthew chapter eleven, when Jesus cries out:



Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves. For my yoke is easy, and my burden light.

– Matthew 11:28-30

SECOND MEDITATION

A Wounded Heart

The second aspect of his heart that Jesus revealed in this vision to St. Margaret Mary is that his heart is wounded. She tells us:



The wound which he received on the cross appeared there visibly.

Most theologians agree that the wound being referred to is the wound in Christ's side, given by the Roman soldier who thrust a spear into our Lord's chest after the crucifixion, to make sure that Jesus was dead.

SECOND MEDITATION

Crowned with Thorns

The Bible tells us that blood and water flowed out of that wound. The Fathers of the Church identify that blood and water as symbols of the sacraments of the Eucharist and Baptism.

And so they make a connection between the Genesis story of God forming Eve out of a rib taken from Adam's side while he was sleeping (cf. Genesis 2:21-22), and God forming the Church — through the sacraments — out of this wound in Christ's side while he hangs in the sleep of death.

What does this wound tell us about Christ's heart, the heart whose identity is love?

It tells us that the love of Jesus is not a weak and sentimental love. It is not just a teddy bear and chocolate Valentine love. It is a tough, strong, self-sacrificing love.

Jesus is the love who throws himself in front of his beloved to save her from the attacks of her evil enemies. The Sacred Heart of Jesus is the heart that fights and struggles and dies for the good of his beloved. The Sacred Heart of Jesus is the heart of a warrior.

It is this aspect of Christ's love that tamed and converted the pagan barbarians in medieval Europe. When the Roman Empire collapsed, these pagan barbarians flooded Europe and entangled it in devastating tribal violence and ever-shifting alliances.

In that distorted pagan culture, cruelty and violence were taken to be accomplishments: the more people you could subdue by terror and sword, the greater you were thought to be.

The power of the Gospel changed that, little by little, over the course of the centuries. In Christ, these warrior cultures were exposed to a new scale of values, a new kind of power — the power of self-sacrificial love, of Christ-like love — and it changed them.

The pagan warriors, immersed in this gospel, in the fire of the Sacred Heart, were gradually forged into Christian Knights, who solemnly vowed to use their physical strength and prowess not to assert their own passing glory, but to serve and protect the innocent, the poor, and the helpless, to defend truth and goodness, for the everlasting glory of God.

The Sacred Heart is wounded because Jesus is the first Christian warrior, who courageously laid down his life for us when we were helpless against sin and evil, as he continues to do every single day, in the Eucharist.

The problem with opening our hearts to other people is that we make ourselves vulnerable. There is no guarantee that the other person will listen to us, understand us, or even respect us, let alone welcome and help us.

When God created human beings, and invited us into his friendship, he too made himself vulnerable. There was no guarantee that his human creatures would accept his offer — and in fact, our first parents didn't: they abandoned God, spurning him by eating the forbidden fruit.

And when Jesus came to redeem us, he took that same risk: He made himself vulnerable. He revealed the heart of God, without any guarantee that the people he loved so fiercely would love him in return. And in fact, many of them didn't, and many of them still don't. And that's why St. Margaret Mary saw the Sacred Heart encircled by a crown of thorns.

Can you think of anything more painful than the tender flesh of an interior organ like a heart being pierced by a crown of thorns?

That's the image Jesus uses to reveal to us how much it hurts him when the sinners he loves and wants to save reject him. In another revelation to St. Margaret Mary, Jesus explained it like this:



If they gave me a return, then all that I have done for them would appear but little to my love. But they entertain only coldness towards me, and the only response they make to my advances is their rejection of me.

We have the power to cause Jesus pain, sadness, and even “distress and agony,” as the Gospel writers describe it when they show Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Sometimes, we think that God is so far away and so perfect that the little concerns and decisions of our daily life really don't matter that much to him.

Other times, we fall into the trap of thinking of God as if he were a harsh and cruel judge who scrutinizes us from a comfortable distance. Nothing could be further from the truth.

God cares; God is close to us; so close, in fact, that when we scorn him, or ignore him, or rebel against him, it is as if we were driving a thorn into his heart.

SECOND MEDITATION

Taking Up Our Cross

But there is another side to that. If we have the power to hurt the Sacred Heart, we also have the power to delight that heart, to fill it with joy, to give it the deep satisfaction that comes from being loved.

This thought brings us to the fourth and final symbol that appeared in that wondrous revelation to St. Margaret Mary: the cross that surmounts the Sacred Heart.

On fire with love, wounded for love, pierced by the thorns of unrequited love, the Sacred Heart is also surmounted by a cross. Certainly the cross makes us think of Christ's passion, and of all the sufferings he endured, out of love, during those horrible, glorious days. The Crown of Thorns that surrounds his heart is also a reference to his Passion.

But the cross is not only a symbol of Christ's suffering love. The cross is also a renewal of the Lord's invitation, of the Lord's offer of friendship. Before his passion began, here is what Jesus said about the cross:



Then he [Jesus] said to all, "If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me"

– Luke 9:23

Here is the secret to causing the Sacred Heart joy instead of sorrow: following Jesus.

All God really wants is our friendship, because he knows that only friendship with him can give us the deep, lasting fulfillment that we all desire. After all, that's what he created us for, to live in communion with him, in friendship with him. That's the purpose of our lives. And how do we say yes to that offer of friendship? By following Jesus.

The cross has always been a symbol of the followers of Jesus. By planting the cross on his Sacred Heart, our Lord is symbolically renewing his invitation: "Follow me."

This is another reason why Pope Pius XI called devotion to the Sacred Heart "the epitome of our religion" and by Pope Benedict XVI called it "irreplaceably important."

In the Sacred Heart, we experience in a fresh way God's love for us, and it makes us want to love him in return; it makes us want to follow him more closely. This experience and response of love is the essence of Christianity.

SECOND MEDITATION

Conclusion & Further Reflection

What exactly can we do to follow Jesus? What practical forms should our response of love take? What does it look like, in our daily lives, when we take up our cross and walk with the Lord?

Those are some of the questions we will try to answer in the conference. But for now, take some time to ponder these symbols of God's love for each one of us, letting them conquer your heart: the throne of fire, the wound of the warrior's heart, the piercing thorns, and the cross.

Questions for Personal Reflection or Group Discussion

- 1 Which symbol in the image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus speaks most significantly to me and why?
- 2 Make a list of the ways that God has shown his love to me personally. Take some time to thank him for those gifts, and to enjoy his love.
- 3 Why do sins cause so much pain to the Sacred Heart? What does the world around me think of sin? Which attitude towards sin seems to have more influence in my own mind, Christ's or the world's?



The designs of his heart are from age to age, to rescue their souls from death, and to keep them alive in famine.

– Psalm 33:11, 19, NABR



Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves. For my yoke is easy, and my burden light.

– Matthew 11:28-30, NABR



Thus says the LORD: When Israel was a child I loved him, out of Egypt I called my son. Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, who took them in my arms; I drew them with human cords, with bands of love; I fostered them like one who raises an infant to his cheeks; yet, though I stopped to feed my child, they did not know that I was their healer.

– Hosea 11:1, 3-4, NABR



Beloved, let us love one another, because love is of God; everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God. Whoever is without love does not know God, for God is love. In this way the love of God was revealed to us: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might have life through him. In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as expiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also must love one another.

– I John 4:7-11, NABR

CONFERENCE

Introduction

To sum up what we have seen so far in this Retreat Guide, I would like to cite a passage from the universal Catechism, which explains the solid theology of this devotion, independent of the supernatural visions and revelations that over the years have illustrated that theology.



Jesus knew and loved us each and all during his life, his agony and his Passion, and gave himself up for each one of us: “The Son of God... loved me and gave himself for me” [Galatians 2:20]. He has loved us all with a human heart. For this reason, the Sacred Heart of Jesus, pierced by our sins and for our salvation, “is quite rightly considered the chief sign and symbol of that... love with which the divine Redeemer continually loves the eternal Father and all human beings” without exception [Pope Pius XII].

–CCC 478

If you are using this Retreat Guide, God has already given you at least a small experience of this love, and he has already stirred up in your soul a desire to love him in return — that experience and that desire are the core of devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

In this conference, I would simply like to offer a few reflections on some of the practical expressions of that devotion that have developed in the Church. Maybe one or two of them will resonate with you, and become a good channel for your love.

CONFERENCE

Removing Thorns

The first expression of devotion to the Sacred Heart is the most obvious. If someone you love comes to you in pain, the first thing you want to do is remove the cause of that pain.

If they sprained their ankle, you help them put some ice on it. If they scraped their knee, you help them clean and dress the wound. If they are hungry, you give them something to eat. The pain experienced by the Sacred Heart is symbolized by the thorns that pierce that heart. To show our love, then, we want to do everything we can to remove those thorns.

Jesus has explained what those thorns are: they are sins. Every sin is a rejection of God’s love, because every sin, like original sin itself, is disobedience to God’s loving plan for our lives and for the world. And so, at the very center of devotion to the Sacred Heart we find the basic work of the Church as a whole and of every sincere Christian: the conversion of sinners, the bringing of people into friendship with Jesus Christ.

Someone who is truly devoted to the Sacred Heart, therefore, will do what the first Apostles did, responding generously to Christ's great commission:



Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.

– Matthew 28:19-20

- Every time we have the chance to share our experience of Christ's love and our knowledge of his truth with another person, we are removing a thorn from the Sacred Heart.
- Every time we show forth God's love to those who haven't experienced it yet, through our words and works of kindness and service and mercy, we are removing a thorn from the Sacred Heart.
- Every time we help someone find their way back to or deeper into a life of prayer and the sacraments, we are removing a thorn from the Sacred Heart.

Of course, those efforts would be kind of counterproductive if we ourselves hadn't declared war against sin in our own lives; our ongoing commitment to virtue, therefore, to "not grow weary of doing good" (2 Thessalonians 3:13), as St. Paul puts it, is a key element in this devotion.

It's worthwhile to remember that both of these things, helping sinners find their way back to Jesus and avoiding sin ourselves, require an ongoing, steady effort to get to know Jesus and his teachings through prayer and study.

Our daily time of personal prayer, our study of the Gospels and the faith of the Church, and all our other devotions, then, which help us to know Jesus more and more, fit right into this devotion.

And so, the first form of devotion to the Sacred Heart is simply removing thorns by spreading the light of Christ, through our Christ-like thoughts, words, and actions that God can use to lead sinners back to the Father's house. It's an every day thing. It's a way of life. And it brings relief and joy to the heart of God.

This is the origin of what gradually became the practice of formal consecration to the Sacred Heart.

When we consecrate ourselves to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, we commit ourselves, out of love, to let him be the King and Lord of our lives, to obey his commandments and his will, to be dedicated to him and to serve him in whatever way the Holy Spirit may ask us.

- We can make this consecration in our own words, maybe even writing out a personal prayer of consecration. Or we can use one of the many formulas that others have written through the years; St. Margaret Mary herself wrote out a prayer of consecration.
- We can also consecrate our families to the Sacred Heart — this is often done by putting an image of the Sacred Heart in some prominent place in the family's home. (This practice gradually came to be called the Enthronement of the Sacred Heart.)
- We can also consecrate our parishes, our apostolates, even whole nations have consecrated themselves in this way. And in 1899, Pope Leo XIII consecrated the whole world to the Sacred Heart.

It is a beautiful thing to make this consecration. And when we renew it frequently, we give great pleasure to the Sacred Heart, because we show him the loyalty and friendship that he deserves and desires, but that he so often seeks and doesn't find. And we also remind ourselves of our commitment to keep removing the thorns that cause him such sorrow.

At the end of this Retreat Guide we have reproduced a common prayer of consecration to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

CONFERENCE

Making Reparation

In Jesus' conversations with St. Margaret Mary, he singled out a particular sin that causes him more pain than any other. And this was something new in the history of this devotion.

In the early centuries of the Church, Christians developed a devotion to the five wounds of Jesus on the cross: the nail wounds in his hands and feet, and the spear wound in his side. These were contemplated as symbols and proofs of his humanity, and of his real, self-sacrificial love.

But it wasn't until the Middle Ages that devotion to Christ's heart became explicit. We begin to find it in the writings of St. Anselm, and especially St. Bernard of Clairvaux, among others.

And we also find it in special revelations that Jesus gave to some consecrated women, especially to two nuns from the Cistercian convent of Helfta in Germany. These were St. Mechtilde of Magdeburg, and St. Gertrude the Great.

Later, devotion to the Sacred Heart continued to spread and appear in theological and popular writings and preaching, and it found especially strong devotees in the sixteenth-century saints, Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal, who together founded the religious order of the Visitation — the order that St. Margaret Mary would eventually join.

Then with the Lord's work through St. Margaret Mary and her spiritual director, St. Claude de la Colombiere, devotion to the Sacred Heart gradually became universal in the Church, and it has been praised and spread by all the modern popes.

Throughout this long history, the Sacred Heart was seen as a symbol of love, and a source of great comfort for those who were suffering — because they knew that they could unite their sufferings to Christ, who also had suffered so much.

But only with the revelations that Jesus made to St. Margaret Mary did our Lord bring up the emphasis on one particular sin, and on making reparation for this sin.

What was this sin? Ingratitude.

Jesus himself explained this to St. Margaret Mary during the fourth "great" apparition, on June 16, 1675, when he appeared to her standing above the altar, and pointing to his Sacred Heart. He told her:



Behold this heart, which has so loved mankind that it has spared itself nothing, even to being spent and consumed to prove its love for men. And yet it has received in return from the majority of mankind only ingratitude, coldness, and the neglect of me in the sacrament of my love. But what is even more painful to me is that it is hearts consecrated to me which use me thus.

Jesus has not only been ungratefully ignored and taken for granted over the centuries, but he has also been ungratefully persecuted, insulted, and grossly abused - especially through the sacrileges committed against the sacraments, and most especially against the sacrament of the Eucharist.

Obviously, those who are committed to Jesus want to be able to make up for — to repair for — all these offenses, for all this ingratitude. And in his revelations to St. Margaret Mary, Jesus himself gave to the Church a series of prayerful practices that can serve as a channel for that spirit of loving reparation.

Four of these became especially associated with devotion to the Sacred Heart. What's striking about them, for us busy modern Christians, is how nicely they can fit into our schedules. By taking them up, we can easily find a way to express our commitment to Christ, and to keep the fire of his love burning strong in our own hearts.

Frequent Holy Communion

First, there is the practice of frequent Holy Communion.

At the time of St. Margaret Mary, the Church in France was suffering under an influential heresy called Jansenism. Among other mistakes, Jansenism claimed that God's love and mercy were actually limited to a reduced number of select people. One of the consequences of that belief was a dramatic reduction in the reception of Holy Communion among Jansenist sympathizers — no one was really sure if they were among the spiritually elite, so they fearfully refrained from approaching the altar to receive the Eucharist.

By encouraging St. Margaret Mary, and through her the rest of the Church, in just the opposite direction, Jesus was reasserting the vastness and power of his love and mercy; he was reasserting that his love and mercy extend to everyone.

First Fridays

This consists in giving special attention to the Sacred Heart, and its sufferings, on the first Friday of each month. It's like making each first Friday into a mini-Good Friday. The practice consists of going to Mass and receiving Communion on those days, and some people also add going to confession.

In one of his revelations to St. Margaret Mary, Jesus even made a special promise to everyone who receives Holy Communion on nine First Fridays in a row (making a kind of novena out of the First Fridays). Here is how she described this promise in a letter to her superior:



One Friday during Holy Communion, he said these words to his unworthy slave, if she be not mistaken: "I promise you, in the excessive mercy of my heart, that its all-powerful love will grant to all those who communicate on nine First Fridays of the month the grace of final repentance. They shall not die in its disfavor nor without receiving their sacraments, and my divine heart will be their assured refuge at the last moment."

This promise seems so extreme and so specific that it caused a lot of controversy among theologians before St. Margaret Mary's canonization. But after the Pope referred specifically and positively to this promise in his declaration of canonization, the controversy ceased.

It's just one more sign of how wildly Jesus loves us and thirsts for our love. He knows that if we take the time and effort to open ourselves to his graces through simple practices like this, it will make a huge difference in our lives and in the lives of those around us.

Holy Hour

This consists in an hour of prayer in the presence of the Eucharist. It began as an hour of prayer on Thursday night, but popular piety has made it overflow into any day and any time.

When Jesus gave this idea to St. Margaret Mary, he connected it with what he suffered in the Garden of Gethsemane on the first Holy Thursday. On that night, he asked his three closest Apostles to accompany him, to pray with him in his agony, but they kept falling asleep, and he had to suffer alone.

Jesus told St. Margaret Mary that through this weekly Holy Hour she would "keep me company in the prayer I then offered to my Father." He asked her to implore God's mercy for sinners during that hour, and in that way, he said, she would "lessen in some way the bitterness I felt at that time because of the abandonment by my Apostles."

Jesus wants to spend time with us, and he wants us to want to spend time with him — because he really does love us; the Holy Hour is a way for us respond to that desire.

Liturgical Feast of the Sacred Heart

Before his revelations to St. Margaret Mary, there had already emerged some localized liturgical celebrations in honor of the Sacred Heart, most especially under the inspiration of St. John Eudes, another French saint devoted to the Sacred Heart.

But in the fourth "great" apparition to St. Margaret Mary, Jesus asked for the universal institution of this feast, for the whole Church. It took awhile for this desire to be fulfilled, but the liturgical feast of the Sacred Heart did indeed become obligatory for the entire Church under Pope Pius IX in 1856.

The Mass for this day emphasizes all the themes we have been reflecting on: love and incarnation, suffering and reparation, and intimate friendship with Jesus Christ.

CONFERENCE

Making Reparation

Consecrating ourselves to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and staying close to that Sacred Heart through these prayerful practices of reparation, are concrete ways to keep the fire of God's love burning in our hearts. It is good that Jesus gave us these tools, because being Christ's disciples in this fallen world is not easy — in fact, it seems to be getting harder and harder. Jesus understands that.

When he appeared to St. Margaret Mary and asked her to give him some consolation for the ingratitude of so many others, she protested. She said she was too weak, too sinful to take on such an exalted mission.

But Jesus replied by telling her that he would make up for all her weaknesses. And then he did a remarkable thing. Here is how St. Margaret Mary described it:



I protested my own inability. "See," he replied, "this will enable you to supply for all your deficiencies." And at that moment his heart opened, and there came from it so burning a flame that I feared I should be consumed by it. It was more than I could bear and I cried out for pity upon my weakness. "I will be your strength," he said to me, "and so fear nothing..."

Something similar had happened to St. Catherine of Siena, a third order Dominican who lived in Italy during the fourteenth century. Jesus came to her in a vision and seemed to take away her earthly heart. Suddenly, she was engulfed by a brilliant radiance. Then Christ approached her and in his hands was a heart, glowing with light. She fell to the ground, and the Lord drew nearer, placing the heart within her breast. Then he said,



My daughter, I have taken from you your own heart, and to replace it I give you mine that you may live by it forever.

Later, when she asked him why he permitted his side to be opened after his death, he explained:



My purpose, was to uncover to men the secret of my Heart, so that they might know my love is greater indeed than the external signs I give of it. For while there was an end to my sufferings, my love for men is without limit.

To be true apostles of his Sacred Heart, to spread the fire of his love and to remove the thorns that wound him, day after day, is indeed a high and difficult calling.

If we had to depend only on our own strength, it would be impossible. But we don't. Jesus needs only our sincere desire and our decent effort — his limitless and all-powerful love will do all the rest.

Take some time to prayerfully review the ten questions in the personal questionnaire. The Holy Spirit may want to use them to give you some encouragement, guidance, and new ideas.

Personal Questionnaire

- 1 In my Christian journey so far, what things have most helped me get to know Jesus and his teachings?
- 2 What can I do in the coming months to continue getting to know Jesus and his teachings?
- 3 How firmly do I believe that my small acts of faith and love for God, and that my little prayers and sacrifices, can actually help make reparation for the sins and ingratitude of those who do not love Jesus? How do I typically manifest this belief in my daily life?
- 4 Which of the practices discussed in this conference (consecration, frequent Communion, the First Fridays, the Holy Hour, the liturgical Feast of the Sacred Heart) attracted me most and why?
- 5 Why does Jesus want us to receive Holy Communion as frequently as we can?
- 6 What do I currently do to prepare myself to receive Holy Communion consciously and fervently? What could I do to prepare myself better?
- 7 Jesus is truly present (body, blood, soul, and divinity) in the sacrament of the Eucharist. And the sacrament of the Eucharist is reserved in the tabernacles of almost every Catholic Church. How does he feel when I take time out of my busy schedule to visit him there, even just for a few moments?
- 8 Some people mock devotion to the Sacred Heart by saying that only a selfish God would complain about not being loved. How would I respond to that accusation?

9 When was the last time I tried to speak about Jesus Christ to a non-believer?

10 How deeply do I believe that God can make fruitful even my smallest effort to help others know better and respond more generously to the love of God as revealed in the Sacred Heart of Jesus?

CONFERENCE

A Common Prayer of Consecration to the Sacred Heart



Most holy Heart of Jesus, fountain of every blessing, I love You. With a lively sorrow for my sins I offer You this poor heart of mine. Make me humble, patient, and pure, and perfectly obedient to Your Will.

Good Jesus, grant that I may live in You and for You. Protect me in the midst of danger and comfort me in my afflictions. Bestow on me health of body, assistance in temporal needs, Your blessing on all that I do, and the grace of a holy death. Amen.

NOTES

Record Your Thoughts Here

FURTHER READING

For Reflection & Prayer

If you feel moved to continue reflecting and praying about this theme, you may find the following books helpful:

- *The Sacred Heart Yesterday and Today*
by Rev. Arthur R. McGratty, SJ
- *The Devotion to the Sacred Heart*
by Jean Croiset, SJ
- *The Autobiography of St. Margaret Mary*
by St. Margaret Mary
- *The Life and Revelations of St. Gertrude the Great*
by St. Gertrude the Great
- *Haurietis Aquas: Encyclical Letter on Devotion to the Sacred Heart*
by Pope Pius XII

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