



Entry into the Sacred Heart is for Everyone

March 2009

Dear Friends of the Heart of Christ,

There is a scene in The Passion of the Christ movie that gives me much thought for this Lenten Sacred Heart reflection. On Mount Calvary at the time when Jesus dies for us, one of the soldiers present takes his long spear and thrusts it into the ribs of Christ-aiming right for his heart. Jesus seems to have expired and this will not leave any doubt. Gathering storm clouds urge him on for he does not want to be caught in the violent winds and rains that have begun to pelt him. Recall the characters played by the soldiers and the terrible sufferings they wreck on Jesus. They are portrayed as heartless, mocking, crude, there to do a job and be over with it. Inflicting suffering on others makes them feel powerful, in control, dominant.

As the centurion takes his long, steel-tipped spear and jabs it into the flesh of the dead Christ, a stream of blood and water literally flies out at him spurting over him into his face and eyes. In an instant he is changed. He is no longer the arrogant, jesting, hard-hearted person he was but is transformed both physically and spiritually. He thus proclaims, "In truth this man was the Son of God." Tradition has named this soldier Longinus-a latinized form of the Greek word *longche* which means spear. A statue of him as Saint Longinus appears in the Vatican by the famous artist Bernini. We are told that Longinus was healed of his poor eyesight and converted to Christianity, eventually dying as a martyr for the faith. He is venerated in the Catholic and Orthodox Churches as a saint and interestingly enough shares a feast day on October 16th with Saint Margaret Mary who received revelations from the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Legend grew around the "holy lance" of Longinus and it was thought that whoever possessed it would be able to conquer the world, somewhat like the ring that was sought after in the popular book and movie Lord of the Rings. Today there exists several historic spears that propose to be the lance used by Longinus. Perhaps the one with the best claim is in the Holberg Museum in Vienna, Austria. Made of iron, it can be traced back for certain to Constantine, the Roman Emperor who first adopted Christianity in the early fourth century. The lance was also known to Napoleon who tried to obtain it after the battle of Austerlitz, but it was smuggled out of the city at the beginning of the fight and he never got his hands on it. Charlemagne, according to legend, carried it for 47 successful battles, but died when he accidentally dropped it. This lance finally ended up in the possession of the House of the Hapsburgs and was part of the collection in the Hofburg Museum.

In September of 1912, a young watercolor painter living in Vienna visited the museum and learned of the lance and its reputation. His name was Adolf Hitler. He was mesmerized by it and



longed to have it as his instrument of power, to hold as he said, “the destiny of the world in my hands...” On March 14, 1938, after he had risen to power, Hitler annexed Austria and ordered the Hapsburg collection, containing the lance, to be sent to Nuremberg. It was loaded onto an armed SS train and arrived in this city, heart of the Nazi movement. There it remained in St. Catherine’s Church for the next six years until it was put in a protective underground vault. Lt. Walter William Horn took possession of it in the name of the U.S. government at 2:10 pm on April 30, 1945- the same day that Hitler committed suicide in a bunker outside Berlin at 3:30 pm, just 80 minutes later. Now this lance is back in the Hofburg Museum. Is it authentic? General George S. Patton thought so. There are also three other spears that claim to be Longinus’ lance, one of which is in the Vatican.

Historical evidence anchors our imaginations in reality. The soldier standing by the cross of Jesus took his spear and slit the side of Christ. Jesus permitted his Sacred Heart to be opened. St. Augustine says, “The Evangelist is very careful in his expression; he does not say, the soldiers pierced or wounded His side, but he opened it, as if to open for us the door of life, from which flow the Sacraments of the Church, without which there can be no access to the true life.”

What does this opening in Christ’s side and his Sacred Heart have to do with us? Obviously, it must have tremendous significance because countless artists, theologians and contemplatives have portrayed and reflected upon this sacred aperture. A few days after the events of the crucifixion we see the risen Lord inviting Saint Thomas to stick his finger into his side, where a permanent mark is left, and to abandon his doubts and believe. In a recent book (in Italian) on Saint Padre Pio, new information on the wounds of the famous stigmatic priest have been published for the first time. In it Padre Pio relates that at the time of his stigmata he saw the Lord in his crucified form, lamenting the ingratitude of men, especially those consecrated to him and favored by him. The book provides fresh insight about the priest’s wounds, particularly the one in his side which is described as having a ‘triangular form’ with definite edges. Furthermore, Pio’s wounds emitted a heavenly scent that had the intense odor of violets.

Something very powerful takes place as we prayerfully place ourselves at the side of Christ next to that sacred wounded portal. We are drawn in. We can take refuge in the abode of Christ’s heart, passing through an opening that never closes and which invites all human creation to enter. Do temptations assail us? Enter and seek refuge in this Sacred Heart. Do the troubles and trials of life depress us? Enter and receive comfort and protection therein. Do anxieties overwhelm us? Enter and be surrounded by the peace the world cannot give. Do past transgressions weigh down upon us? Enter and let an ocean of divine mercy wash, refresh and purify our souls.

In order to comprehend the desire of Christ’s heart that beckons all humanity to it, let’s turn to the wonderful witness of Blessed Maria Droste Zu Vischering. Countess Maria, born into an aristocratic German family lived from 1863-1899. Her short life truly centered on God right from her



beginnings. Paging through her definitive biography by Abbe Louis Chasle in 1911, one sees pictures of her family castle idyllically set near the placid waters of a beautiful lake. However, Maria's childhood coincided with the rise of Prussian imperialism. Tremendous currents of secularization were at work as the Chancellor of the German Empire, Otto von Bismarck introduced his Kulturkampf (literally "culture struggle") to weaken the influence and power of the Roman Catholic Church. Our young saint even though she was living at her family castle in Darfeld like a cloistered religious was very much aware of the political conditions. Her father vouched for this saying, "... the Kulturkampf had a powerful influence on Maria, not only as regards religion, but also in the formation of her character."

In 1888 Countess Maria disappeared into an obscure convent in Munster belonging to the Good Shepherd nuns. There she immersed herself into an apostolate of caring for troubled girls and other poor people. Providentially, she received the name Sister Mary of the Divine Heart on the day she took the habit. For five years she lived a hidden life until she was asked to go to Portugal. On route she stopped at the magnificent shrine of Sacre Coeur on Montmartre in Paris where she was the recipient of a special grace that enlightened her mind. "Yes," she said to herself, "that is indeed how it ought to be; the Sacred Heart of Jesus must reign over the whole world."

Extraordinary graces as well as painful afflictions filled her years as superior in Oporto, Portugal. In a way, she became like a new Margaret Mary receiving many intimate communications from the Lord. Once He said to her that His desire had been to establish devotion to His Divine Heart and now that the exterior devotion had been introduced through His apparitions to blessed Margaret Mary and had spread far and wide, He wished also to see the interior devotion becoming more strongly established. That is, He wished souls to get into the habit of uniting themselves more and more interiorly with Him and of offering Him their hearts as His abode.

Sister Mary of the Divine Heart was privileged to receive many messages from the Lord, but she is best known for the incessant appeal made to her by the Sacred Heart to have the whole world consecrated to Him. His personal entreaties to her made our saint feel a sense of the utmost urgency to fulfill the Lord's request.

With this consecration, the Sacred Heart attached immense graces for the world-for the laity, for clergy and religious, for unbelievers, for sinners, for children not yet born. Christ's love is universal and it enkindles the entire world. No corner is left untouched by it.

Ordered by the Lord to "write to Rome as soon as possible," Maria made the Sacred Heart's request known to the reigning pontiff, Pope Leo XIII. Leo responded with hesitation and procrastination. Finally, this message from the poor superior of Oporto moved him to act: "I recognized the ardent desire He has to see His adorable Heart more and more glorified and known,



and to spread His gifts and blessings over the world. And He chose Your Holiness, prolonging your days, so that you might console His outraged Heart...”

In response to this, the Pope ordered an investigation at Oporto that lasted for two months. Afterward, Leo decided to consecrate the world to the Sacred Heart of Jesus on June 11, 1899 as announced in his encyclical *Annum Sacrum*. He called it the greatest act of his pontificate. Mother Mary of the Divine Heart never lived to see this take place, at least from an earthly perspective. She died on the feast of the Sacred Heart, two days before the consecration. The Pope reached the ripe old age of 93 and died in 1903 to become the longest living pontiff in history.

The Sacred Heart of Jesus calls each of us present here today and every human being in the world to come to His Heart. No one in the universe is exempt from his love and his care. We must step forward and enter this heart so he can possess our hearts. If we have walked paths that do not follow his teachings, then our sincere acknowledgement of our failings and our heartfelt repentance will set us right again. As one of our Marian priests recently said, “There is no sin that cannot be forgiven with the proper dispositions.”

May the Heart of the Universe that loves each of us so much, transform us into his true disciples, guiding us and protecting us in the days ahead.