



The Sacred Heart: Maria Hasselblad (Mother Elizabeth) and Don Bosco and their devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus

by Sister Judith Clare

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Dear Friends of the Heart of Christ,

Several years ago, I had the occasion to pick up a book entitled Mother Elisabeth. This book I had seen in our community library for years, but I never felt attracted to read it. As I began to go through the pages, I found myself devouring a first-class story of how God mysteriously speaks to a human soul and how, no matter what obstacles rise up, God's plan is always accomplished in the end. When I had finished this book, I started to read it a second time. It was that good! Afterward, I said to myself, "If this person is not one of God's holy ones, I don't now who is." This was not a story of a wonder-working saint or one who had extraordinary revelations but of a convert to Catholicism who really opened her heart to God and wanted to do his bidding. A few years after I had read this book, I was riding in the car with another Sister who was reading the Roman Observer, the official Vatican newspaper. She mentioned to me that the Pope was going to beatify and canonize some new "saints." I asked that she read the names to me. To my surprise and utter delight, the name of Mother Elisabeth Hasselblad was on the list. I felt like a friend of mine had finally gotten the recognition she deserves.

Since it is "almost" a tradition that our February talks devolve around the saints of the Sacred Heart, I'd like to begin with Mother Elisabeth-a great devotee of the Sacred Heart.

Maria Hasselblad was born of Lutheran stock in Sweden in 1870. (She died in 1957.) Coming to the United States as a young woman, she sought a job that would help support her struggling family back in Sweden. Perhaps the most characteristic trait of Maria was her absolute sincerity in seeking to know God and to do only what he wanted. Because of this disposition of heart, God was able to lead her along paths that seemed at times to be very twisting. Yet, she sought the Lord with single-heartedness and he in turn gave her deep insights and convictions into his will that were ratified by far-seeing priests and spiritual directors.

Before Maria became a Catholic, she studied and worked in the medical profession in the New York City area. Her early notes are filled with interesting stories of how a dedicated young woman helped so many unfortunate people. But this one episode from her young adulthood caught my attention. At the hospital where Maria worked, a birthday party had been planned for one for the medical staff. As the party was winding down, one of the doctors suggested that they should go down and visit the hospital morgue at midnight. Some of the partygoers resolutely refused. But as a small group dared to go, Maria was moved to accompany them since she was one of the senior

God be Praised!



nurses and did not want them to be afraid of death. Finding their way to the correct door posed a problem, but finally the few brave ones stood in the long, vaulted room that was nearly filled with corpses, barely visible in the low, eerie light. As they stood there silently, Maria felt compelled to pray for these souls and moved a little farther away from the young students who preferred to stay near the door. Then she realized that they had gone, and before she could respond, the heavy, insulated door closed behind them with a click, locked from the outside. Now she was alone in a room full of dead bodies! Instead of panicking, she devised a plan to go from bier to bier and to pray for each person who had passed on to eternity while she waited to be rescued. In this process, something disturbed her. There she was the only living being among so many deceased. Or was she? In the stillness, she thought she heard breathing. With her heart racing, she carefully proceeded from body to body until she found a young man with a ticket attached to him saying he had died of a heart attack. Faint breathing sounds were emanating from him. Hour after hour Maria worked to revive him, and indeed his life was saved.

I found this story fascinating because it reveals how God sometimes allows seemingly unfortunate circumstances to happen (like Maria being locked in a morgue at midnight) in order to create situations that will show God's saving power. These kinds of things fill the lives of God's holy ones and, of course, our lives too. Maria's response to this was, "Don't ask me how it happened. I don't know. God did it! I was only a simple tool!" From an undesirable situation, God's friends can be the instruments to bring about incalculable good.

Maria Hasselblad did embrace the Catholic faith at age 32. To my astonishment, I read how she was baptized in the chapel of the Visitation Convent in Washington, D.C.-yes, the same Order as our monastery here in Tyringham-by a Jesuit Priest, J.G. Hagen, who was a personal friend of one of our past superiors. Maria's notes reveal her inner state at this time: "In an instant God's love was poured out over me. I understood that this love could only be answered by sacrifice, by a love ready to suffer for His Glory. Without hesitation I offered my life, my will to follow Him on the Way of the Cross."

When our interior sights are so firmly set on the Lord, devoid of personal gains or the satisfying of our own wishes, then the Sacred Heart of Jesus can fully lead us in the way he wants us to go. Then we begin to perceive his ever-so delicate promptings within us and then we truly begin to "hear" and to yield to his will and not to our own.

Maria's discernment eventually led her to a religious vocation, but as I stated before, God had quite a circuitous route in mind for her. As a citizen of Sweden, Maria grew up with a great love for her fellow countrywoman St. Bridget of Sweden who died in 1373. St. Bridget eventually left Sweden after her husband's death and came to Rome where she had revelations on the state of the church and the foundation of a new religious order. This religious order (commonly called the Brigittines), once prosperous, had dwindled to a few houses by the early 1900's. In fact, the house where St.



Bridget lived in Rome was now a monastery of Carmelite Nuns. It was to this monastery that Maria felt herself called. She had visited there in the past when a friend, whose mother she had cared for, invited her on a European trip.

Now a mysterious attraction directed her to this house that she had somehow visualized as a child. But Maria was suffering from chronic ulcers that constantly plagued her and threatened her activity and even her very life. However, the astute and prophetic vision of the Carmelite superior recognized the true religious calling of Maria, and in March 1904 at age 34 she entered the Carmelite monastery in Rome. This may seem very natural and normal in the course of events since Maria was drawing so close to God. But the real adventures of her life were just beginning. There she was in a Carmelite monastery that had once been the house of St. Bridget of Sweden.

Maria herself admits that interiorly she felt a deep conviction that God wanted her to revive the ancient Order of the Brigittines and to be clothed with the gray Brigittine habit. It would be a huge understatement to say that one does not usually receive the habit of another religious order in a particular monastery. But this is exactly what happened to Maria! [For example, it would be unheard of for a postulant in a Visitation monastery to be clothed with the Dominican habit.] Maria was able to receive the traditional Brigittine habit in a monastery full of Carmelite Nuns! Not only that, but she admits that she felt impelled to work for the returning of this Carmelite monastery into the hands of the Brigittines!

Maria's clothing of the habit took place on the Feast of the Sacred Heart, 1906, and a few days later she made her vows as a daughter of St. Bridget. She was then allowed to visit the few remaining Brigittine monasteries in England, Spain, Holland and Germany. Her life's energies were spent re-vitalizing the Order of St. Bridget that had once been so flourishing. God was with her amid countless difficulties, and his plan was accomplished in the end.

I would like to take a few minutes to quote from a letter written by the Carmelite superior Mother Hedwig to Maria, now Sister Elisabeth, while she was visiting the Brigittine nuns at Syon Abbey in England. In it we see a soul-searching response to God's will in a very contradictory situation. It is dated 1908. Mother Hedwig writes to Maria:

"Dearest Daughter of St. Brigitta, of St. Teresa and also of mine: Today, I write you in answer to your dear letter from Syon... It seems really like a dream come true, to know that you are among Brigittines, dressed in their habit, which you received from the daughters of St. Teresa and in the very house where St. Brigitta lived and died. All this seems to me so Providential, that I ask myself if Our Lord will stop there, or if He has perhaps some other plan which has not yet been revealed to us?... Considering all this, at the Feet of our Sacramental Lord, I feel moved to say to you, Dearest Daughter, that even though I would be very displeased to think that you might be trying to combine some project as regards the



House of St. Birgitta, and hiding it from me, nevertheless, I ask myself, in prayer, what my feelings would be as a daughter of St. Teresa, if the Monastery of Avila or of Albo in Spain, where my Holy Mother lived and where she died, were in the hands of Brigittine Nuns, and these would not cede it to us, the daughters of St. Teresa, in the event that we had the possibility of reacquiring it? And my eyes, filling with tears, gave me the answer: "Yes, according to human justice, I would have a right to keep it, but not according to the charity of Jesus Christ." Therefore, my daughter, if Our Lord Jesus might only have chosen us, daughters of St. Teresa, to bring back to the light and to pious care this dear Sanctuary and if then it was in His Divine Will that the Order of St. Brigitta should take it back, and we had thus worked for the greater Glory of God, I would say, "So be it, Lord, because what You do, will always be the best!" There, my dearest Sister Elisabeth-this is what I have on my conscience to tell you; the rest is in the Hands of God."

I have taken time to look at this letter because I believe that its spirit is truly God-like. Instead of clinging to a possession that in human justice is hers by right, this person was able to see, through prayerful consideration, that perhaps God had a different plan in mind. She was willing to put her plan aside, even though this entailed sacrifice, and say "yes" to God's design. To do this one must have a supple heart-open, listening, and ready to respond to what God wants.

Perhaps you are saying to yourself: "What does all this have to do with me, to my parish or community, to the problems I face in my life, and how about our poor world, so torn asunder by natural and human-made disasters?" Well, the Church gives us these saintly examples to show us how we can deal with difficulties, how we can react to troublesome circumstances and how our trust in the Sacred Heart of Jesus can lift us above these painful situations and give us hope and peace. If you ever want to read about human perplexities, pick up a book on the saints. Anything that life can dish out is part of their stories, plus the most marvelous turn-arounds you can imagine because trust in the Sacred Heart, in God's love, always, always triumphs in the end.

You may be wondering what the Sacred Heart of Jesus is saying to us today? He continues to remind us through his faithful friends that we must apply his law of love, that we must open our hearts to love one another. If we continue to harden our hearts, to plan evil against one another and adamantly close our minds and hearts to God's calls and his laws then we will receive according to the measure we give, we will reap what we have harvested. History has borne this out.

May I take a brief example from another saint, John Bosco (1815-1888). Don Bosco, as he is popularly called, was a great educator of youth. But he was also known to have prophetic dreams that warned of future events. In December 1854 he had such a dream in which he foresaw "great funerals at court." Taking this as a warning to the king of Italy not to sign the law closing religious houses, he wrote to him of the consequences he had foreseen in his dream. But the king totally



ignored him. On January 12, 1855 the Queen Mother died at age 54; on January 20, the Queen Maria Adelaida died at 33; on February 11, the king's brother Ferdinand of Savoy died also at 33; on May 7, the king's youngest son died at 4 months. Furious, the king went ahead and signed the law on May 29.

History also gives us the case of Pompeii. Most of us are aware that this ancient city was totally destroyed by a violent volcano eruption in the latter half of the first century. Excavation of its ruins depicted a society centered on materialism, licentiousness, pagan worship and the occult. Few of us are aware of the fact that the destruction of Pompeii had been preceded, a few years before, by an earthquake that caused extensive damage to nearly every one of its pagan temples. Could this have been a warning from the Lord that the people needed to reform their lives? Instead of taking heed, they brushed this aside and actively began to reconstruct their pagan temples and places of pleasure.

The Sacred Heart of Jesus continues to speak to us today as he has done in days of old. Whether it is by the delicate whisperings in our inner selves, significant and vivid dreams, or the events of our everyday lives and the world at large, we need to listen carefully and earnestly ask the Sacred Heart for his guidance and light.

Our Holy Father Pope John Paul II chose to open the year 2005 declaring to the world and to each one of us individually that we must overcome evil with good. "Evil," our Holy Father said, "is not some impersonal force in the world... Evil always has a name and a face: the name and face of those men and women who freely chose it." He stresses that, "Evil is a tragic rejection of the demands of love." We must keep this in mind as we live out our daily lives. Although we may not be intrinsically evil, yet we can become prey to the maneuvers of the Evil One when we chose to water down the demands love makes on us. How do we treat those we live and work with or the strangers that God throws into our paths? Are we loving, merciful, and forgiving? Are we willing to stand up for what is right and even to suffer for it? As we struggle to overcome evil with good we are reminded by our Holy Father that "this fight can be fought effectively only with the weapons of love. When good overcomes evil, love prevails, and where love prevails, there peace prevails." With the help of the Sacred Heart we can defeat evil with good. Let us lean on him and let us tune our hearts and minds to his sound waves of love that will guide us in the days ahead.