

Heart of Jesus

SIGN OF CONTRADICTION

Dear Friends of the Sacred Heart,

As we approach Holy Week, Christians all over the world will move into a sacred time when we are bidden to immerse ourselves more deeply into the sufferings and death of Jesus our Redeemer. Liturgically, we are nearing the end of Jesus' earthly life and we vividly realize that His was one, not of outward peace and benevolence, but of extreme violence and conflict. So many different and difficult human perplexities converged to effect the death of a good and innocent person. Yet if we look at the Gospel of Saint Luke, we see that at the earliest stages of Jesus' life there was already a prophetic sense that Jesus would be a sign of contradiction. This awareness clearly emerges in the Lukan narrative of Jesus' presentation in the Temple [Lk 2: 25-35]. Mary and Joseph bring their baby to the Temple shortly after his birth, as prescribed by Jewish law, and encounter the holy man Simeon. Old and prayerful, Simeon, recognizes God's Anointed One and taking the child in his arms, praises God and says, "Now O Lord, let your servant depart in peace, because my eyes have seen your instrument of salvation, which you have prepared before all the people, a Light to bring your revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel." Then, turning to Mary, he utters a most startling pronouncement: "This child is appointed to be the cause whereby many in Israel will fall and many rise and for a sign which will meet with much opposition. As for you--a sword will pierce your soul--and all this will happen that the inner thoughts of many hearts may be revealed." One may wonder just how awe-struck the young parents of Jesus were at hearing this mysterious message. Their precious child was to be the cause whereby many would fall; he was to be the cause whereby many would rise. His life would meet with much opposition.

There is an insightful reflection on this passage from the Scottish scripture scholar William Barclay. He notes: "It is not so much God who judges a person; a person judges himself; and his judgment is his reaction to Jesus Christ. If, when he is confronted with that goodness, his heart runs out in answering love, he is within the Kingdom. If, when so confronted, he remains unmoved or hostile, he is condemned. There is a great refusal just as there is a great acceptance. Towards Jesus there can be no neutrality. We either surrender to him or are at war with him."

When we glance at the world around us, especially through the social media so readily at our disposal, the obvious is before us: the war is raging, perhaps as never before. Jesus still meets a stiff opposition in our own times; he is still mocked, still ridiculed, still crucified. Hostile forces weave their way in and through the magazines we pick up, the movies we watch, perhaps even the people we encounter on our own streets. And what can we say about ourselves? In one of the most cherished books read by our Holy Founder, Saint Francis de Sales, called *The Spiritual Combat*, written in the sixteenth century, we find these words: "This is indeed the hardest of all struggles; for while we strive against self, self is striving against us, and therefore is the victory here most glorious and precious in the sight of God." Matching this thought our Holy Mother, Saint Jane de Chantal, equally exhorts: "To enjoy the sweetness of God is not solid love, but to humble oneself, to bear contradiction, to die to oneself, to wish to be known to God alone; this indeed is to love."

The reality of suffering struggle, sickness, in-completeness, death carry within them the seeds of a mystery known only and fully to the mind and heart of God. As humans we may desire to isolate the concrete factors which contribute to our dilemmas, but there remains for the most part an illusive dimension which goes beyond our best abilities to analyze. We ultimately come to the bed-rock of Jesus' own response to suffering and hardship: total trust in God. His words reverberate from the lips of the psalmist: "I trusted, I trusted in the Lord and He stooped down to me; He heard my cry."

Many of us who have seen the movie *The Passion of The Christ* by Mel Gibson may recall the scene in which Jesus, covered with wounds and on his way to crucifixion, embraces his cross with great tenderness and speaks the words, "Father, I am your servant." What an ultra contradictory statement to our world's perspective! Jesus professes himself as servant in the midst of utter confusion, human chaos, unbelievable turmoil and he does it with a heart full of humility and trust.

Remembering the actions of Jesus to his particularly cruel set of circumstances helps us in our own personal life responses. Whenever something distasteful happens to us, giving us pain or worry, does it not sustain us to recall what others have suffered and endured? And to know that someone is with us? Anyone who might be interested in Russian history and especially the Romanov era, will realize what a profound effect the soothsayer Rasputin had on the lives of the emperor, empress, and their five children. He had this influence because he was able to assure them that everything would be O.K. especially in regard to the health of their only son and heir to the throne (who was a hemophiliac). Contemplate, then, the divine power of the One whose integrity is peerless and who accepted the contradictions of life with no ulterior motives save God's greater glory.

One of the recommendations which Saint John the Baptist de la Salle use to give this penitents was that they should look upon everything with 'the eyes of faith.' A story emerges from the Russian Orthodox tradition to illustrate this clearly. It took place in 1954 between a spiritual director or 'staretz' and a professional writer. The writer later recalled the encounter: "I wanted to ask him why a tragedy which I experienced in 1951 had happened. When I came to the staretz, before I could ask him anything, he silently gave me another leaflet to read. When I took it I read: 'It Came from Me.' "Happiness and misfortune, rise and fall, health and sickness, glory and dishonor, wealth and poverty--everything, comes from me and must be accepted as such. Those who entrust themselves to me and accept all the trials which I send to them will not be ashamed in the Day of Judgment. They will realize even here in this world why their life took this course and not another. I send to everyone that which is best for him" [quoted from *Russian Mystics* by Sergius Bolshadoff; Cistercian Publications, 1976; pp. 267- 68].

So in our trials we are given the opportunity of embracing something of what the Heart of Jesus experienced: that the pains of life are avenues of access into deeper spiritual realities. Pope Saint John Paul II writes in his book entitled *The Sign of Contradiction*: "Man needs this mystery (of purification) for his interior life, for his asceticism, for this steady approach towards the living God in the darkness of faith; although the darkness hides the face of the living God it unveils the infinite majesty of his holiness."

In our Salesian spiritual tradition there is ample evidence in the life of our sister Saint Margaret Mary which shows her unusual approach to suffering. Our Saint claims to have relished the contradictions sent her way, even from those who were good religious. She did more than just put up with these 'pinpricks,' she really embraced them in a mysterious, mystical way to demonstrate her ardent love of God, even to absurdity. Perhaps by doing so there was a taste of that profound peace which is released when the deepest levels of transcendent being are exposed. Yet to those around her she surely appeared an enigma, a contradiction in and of herself. In her biography of the saint, the author Margaret Yeo pungently presents this picture: "Saints are always difficult for the ordinary mortal to live with or understand and Margaret Mary must have been extremely irritating to common sense. Her terrible self-inflicted mortifications, her charity to the poor, which meant she was always worrying people for money, giving away food instead of eating it herself, always wanting to run off for Confession or Communion, useless all day before Communion and worse after, lost to the world..."

However, we find the contradictions of life happening not only in the lives of saints and mystics, but with everyday people who try to live their lives connected with God. Mary Craig, an English journalist and mother, relates how her own personal trauma was an opening to a deeper awareness of God's presence in her life: "On the day that the second of my two mentally handicapped children was born, I experienced a fathomless despair. I felt that I was drowning and didn't even know how to struggle. Yet there was something in me that wanted to grow through this horror, to use it for good in some way. When I reached what seemed to me the darkest depths, I was suddenly aware of being upheld, aware of a promise of strength, if I would only seek it. I can only say that it was my one and only direct experience of God."

Saint James tells us in his epistle that when we draw close to God, God will draw close to us (4: 8). Since God is love, we know that God is constantly longing to share his divine life with us. But God will not smother us with his love. Instead, God allows contradiction, that is trials, to be part of our existence to remind us that we cannot go it alone, that we need our Creator's loving hand to rescue us. Our difficulties then become guideposts to lead us to God, and the moment we realize this and utilize our deficits to draw close to Him, we open the door to our Savior's heart.

It has been written of Saint Margaret Mary that the nineteen years she spent in the Visitation Monastery of Paray-le-Monial were one uninterrupted succession of physical and spiritual trials. In other words, the Sacred Heart was giving her an abundance of opportunities to turn to Him. She recognized this, proclaiming: "Life without the cross would be unbearable. All happiness here below consists of being able to suffer for the Heart of Jesus." Would that her heavenly intercession help us to keep this in mind as we travel our individual paths filled with the joys and sorrows of living, yet rich in potential for a deeper union with the Heart of Christ. +

This talk on Sacred Heart spirituality was given in our Gathering Room on April 2nd, 2017. If you would like to attend similar presentations by the Sisters, our next talk will be held on Sunday, May 7th, 2017 at 4:00 p.m.