

FOLLOWING HIS EXAMPLE: *the lowly heart of Jesus*

Dear Friends of the Sacred Heart,

We are living at a dangerous time. Yet, throughout the turmoil of the ages, the Heart of Jesus has beckoned the world to learn two invaluable lessons from his heart. They are the lessons of gentleness and lowliness. Matthew's gospel records for us Jesus' own sentiments: "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart" (Matthew 11: 29).

In a world filled with arrogance, power, and greed these counsels seem ill-equipped to provide us with the resources to win wars or subdue vindictive foes. However, it was these qualities of gentleness and lowliness that the Lord Jesus saw fit to place at the pinnacle of imitation if we were to truly be like him.

The theme of lowliness is not just for the Christmas season when we look upon the helpless infant in his manger. It is poignantly on display throughout the lenten season and culminates in the Holy Week scenarios of the brutality that Jesus must undergo at the hands of the rulers of his day. Moreover, when we truly reflect on it, we can see that practically all the great mysteries of Jesus' life, that is, his incarnation, birth, public ministry, and final days of suffering occurred in rather commonplace circumstances. Perhaps the exception would be Jesus' final earthly resting place which was unexpectedly offered through the generosity of the wealthy Joseph of Arimathea. In thus living, Jesus is making a profound revelation to his followers, leaving no doubt as to what is being communicated: God desires us to be lowly. The Scriptures consistently illustrate this truth with many examples. Here are a few worth pondering.

As the historical situation in Judah became more and more desperate with war-clouds gathering ever thicker over the horizons, Zephaniah cautioned all with this prophecy: "When that day come, I will remove your proud boasters from your midst. In your midst I will leave a humble and lowly people, and those who are left in Israel will seek refuge in the name of the Most High" (3: 11-12). From the book of Sirach we hear this warning: "The Lord has thrown down ruler's thrones and seated the humble in their place. The Lord has plucked up the proud by the roots, and planted the lowly in their place" (10: 14-15). And again from Sirach: "The prayer of the lowly pierces the clouds" (35: 17). From the prophet Isaiah: "This is the one whom I approve: the lowly and afflicted one who trembles at my word" (66: 2) and "He sent me to bring glad tidings to the lowly, to heal the brokenhearted" (61: 1). From the book of Judith: "Your strength is not in numbers nor does your power depend on stalwart men, but you are the God of the lowly, the helper of the oppressed, the supporter of the weak, the protector of the forsaken, the savior of those without hope" (9: 11). From the letter of James: "God resists the proud but bestows his favor on the lowly" (4: 6). From Matthew: "Blest are the lowly; they shall inherit the land" (5: 5). And from Mary's magnificat: "The Lord has cast down the mighty from their thrones and lifted up the lowly" (Lk 1: 46-55).

Above all it is most clearly and frequently the Psalms that echo God's protection for the poor, the weak, the needy, the afflicted and the lowly. This is significant because it was the psalms that provided the expression and nourishment of the prayer-life of the Jews. By using these expressions highly charged with references to the lowly, the people prepared their hearts for the coming of the Messiah. Countless other biblical passages call our attention to the fact that it is the lowly who constitute the community of God's favored ones.

It is, furthermore, important to see what is meant by lowliness. Hermeneutically, it is a tricky word. The Hebrew basically renders it by '*anaw*' or '*ani*'. In the Greek Bible, normally used by New Testament writers, it becomes *tapeinos*. However, the notable second century translators of the Bible, Aquila and Symmachus, avoid the Greek word. Aquila uses instead *praus* (meek or gentle), and Symmachus, *ptochos* (poor or needy). Their meticulous care in getting its meaning just right reflects their influential near-contemporary's teaching (that of Rabbi Joshua ben Levi) **that the quality of lowliness is the greatest of all virtues.**

Without reservation, God desires everyone in this room, every Sister in this monastery, every person in this world to be lowly. We are invited to be lowly as Jesus was lowly, that is, to be lowly of heart. God is not asking us all to be poverty-stricken, to be unemployed, unclothed, uneducated, or uninsured. But we are being summoned to adopt a disposition of heart and attitude of lowliness. Pointing out the haughtiness of our national leaders or of another potentate on the world scene does not leave us off the hook. Each person has his essential contribution to make to the ocean of universal lowliness that radically affects life on this earth.

What are we doing to answer this call to personal lowliness of heart? What did Jesus do? His manner of being, of living, spoke plainly of his choice to be lowly. His manner of living reflected what filled His heart. If our hearts are lowly, modelled on the Lord's heart, we will recognize our own frailties and not become chronically distressed over others' shortcomings or our own. If our hearts are lowly, we will cling to what God truly wants over and above our own desires or needs and seek to possess a tranquility and serenity even in difficult circumstances. If our hearts are lowly, the hurts that come our way will not meet with a wall of defensiveness, but rather evince a certain tractability that trusts in God's providential care.

At the beginning of Lent in our monastery, it has been a long-standing tradition that the superior gives the Sisters what is called a "challenge." It is a kind of spiritual invitation to focus in on some virtue that can be practiced with a more "heightened" awareness. Saint Francis de Sales, our founder, was particularly fond of advocating the practice of the "little virtues," or those smaller acts of selflessness that often get overlooked and that relate especially to one's disposition of heart. For this Lent our community was summoned to remember and cultivate these unpretentious but challenging Salesian traits:

1. A graceful condescension to the 'changing humors' of our neighbor.
2. A cheerful bearing with our own imperfections and disadvantages out of love of our own abjection.
3. The good humored putting up with small acts of selfishness.
4. A gentle voice.
5. An agreeable manner of answering those who speak disagreeably to us.
6. A pleasant manner of receiving a refusal.
7. Gratitude and politeness when others oblige us.

Needless to say, putting these quite ordinary responses into our everyday encounters can be more difficult than we may at first imagine, especially when the environment around us tends to be one of assertiveness and confrontation.

So it is that lowliness clothes us in distinctive garb. It does not take the human heart very long to detect its presence. Lowliness radiates a disarming approachability. It says to the other that my needs are secondary where justice, love, and personal need are concerned. It doesn't look to privilege, position, seniority, or God's exclusive blessing on my family origins and accomplishments. Lowliness does not instill fear but invites harmony and healing. And lowliness does not obstruct God's way with its own set of dreams, plans, or pursuits. The Canadian spiritual writer Catherine de Hueck Doherty, it is said, kept a sign near the entrance-way to her room with the homey reminder: "I am third," meaning that God should occupy the first place in her life, her neighbor, the second, and herself, the third.

Lowliness may sound like a make-believe word or unrealistic state, nice for those in monasteries, but definitely not for the real world; for those out there on the streets of life. Such an evaluation of lowliness would be unfortunate. A family devoid of lowliness may well be planting the seeds of their own children's dissipation. A monastery devoid of lowliness may well be creating an environment for its own spiritual stagnation. A nation devoid of lowliness may well be lighting the fuse for its own destruction.

Returning to Jesus' request, he asks us to learn from his heart how to be lowly. We are not born with a natural disposition to be lowly. Original sin predisposes our hearts to pride, and so it takes a conscious effort on our part to learn the lessons of lowliness from the textbook of Jesus' heart. Where do we begin? The starting place is within us. To be lowly, we must first think lowly thought that activate us to pronounce words and perform actions that are lowly. We can benefit from a slow meditation on Jesus' constant response to his sufferings, especially those final days and moments in his life when evil seems to have triumphed. We see in Jesus' demeanor the tremendous power of quiet yet confident trust even in the throes of a hellish crucifixion. God is over all and the greatness of God is not eclipsed by the apparent collapse of Jesus' ministry and teaching. "Father, into your hands, I commend my spirit." Those last words of our dying Savior sprang from a *human heart* that placed its whole being in the care of a power greater than its own.

Learning the lesson of lowliness is vital to our survival. To transform the world, we must start with ourselves or as one spiritual writer has put it, "Only by means of the transformation of the few does the conversion of the many come about." Believing that there will be business as usual amid the escalating pride and power of human hearts is absolute absurdity if we realize that God's plan is to "cast down the mighty from their thrones and lift up the lowly" (Lk 1:52). Christ's sacred heart beckons us, all of us, to help Him save the world by our lowliness of heart. ✚

This talk on Sacred Heart Spirituality was given in our Gathering Room on April 7, 2019. If you would like to attend similar presentations by the Sisters, our next talks will be held on Sunday, May 5th, 2019 at 4:00 p.m.

JUSTICE *and* MERCY

Getting our fair share from the Heart of Jesus

Dear Friends of the Heart of Christ,

Years ago when I was a senior in high school I was driven to school each morning by my uncle who was on his way to work. On the way to school, we would pass by a Jewish synagogue. On the front of this imposing building were the words from the prophet Micah: "To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). That scripture quote has always stayed with me. What a beautiful thought to incorporate into one's life: to act justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with your God. Life in a big public school (there were over 600 students in my graduating class) certainly made such an uplifting thought a challenge. And as life went on, these Godly precepts became more and more exacting. How does one balance these commands of the Lord—to act justly and to love mercy? Sometimes they seem to contradict one another. Yet, they are the two most compelling attributes of the Heart of Jesus.

In our monastery, because we hear the scriptures read everyday at Mass and during the Divine Office, we are constantly exhorted in the passages we sing and read to practice these two Godly virtues of justice and mercy in our lives. From Matthew's Gospel we read, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith" (Mt 23:23). From the prophet Zechariah we read, "This is what the Lord Almighty said: 'Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another'" ((Zech.: 7:9). From the prophet Isaiah we hear: "'The multitude of your sacrifices, what are they to me?' says the Lord. 'I have more than enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fattened animals. I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. When you come to appear before me who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations, I cannot bear your worthless assemblies. Your New Moon feasts and your appointed festivals I hate with all my being. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands in prayer, I hide my eyes from you; even when you offer many prayers, I am not listening. Your hands are full of blood! Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight; stop doing wrong. Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow'" (Is 1:11, 17).

Chanting the psalms of the Divine Office at five different times each day, we are regularly bombarded with the thought that our God is a God of Justice and Mercy. And this Holy God, Creator of the Universe, wants his children to practice these attributes too. Listen to some of these reminders. From Psalm 11: "For the Lord is righteous, he loves justice; the upright see his face"; From Psalm 89: "Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; love and faithfulness go before you"; or how about this one from Psalm 7: "God is the shield that protects me, who saves the upright of heart. God is a just judge, slow to anger; but he threatens the wicked every day, those who will not repent. God will sharpen his sword; he has braced his bow and taken aim. For them he has prepared deadly weapons; he barbs his arrows with fire." Anyone who has seen videos of ancient warriors shooting burning arrows at their foes can appreciate how terrifying and painful this can be. The commentary from the March issue of *Magnificat* is worth repeating here to get the sense of this psalm. The *Magnificat* author writes this concerning Psalm 7: "This is not a nice psalm. The picture of those who, despite God's long patience, will not repent is not a nice picture. Sometimes it does us good to look our choices starkly in the face... God's desire is that we wake from our sins and rise to new life in Christ."

To understand the ways of the Lord better, we need to look at his Divine Heart—a mixture of justice **and** mercy. In the Litany of the Sacred Heart of Jesus we find these two invocations: Heart of Jesus, abode of justice and love and Heart of Jesus, patient and rich in mercy. Many people in our day want a God of mercy but not a God of justice. Why? Because, I think, they can then justify their unfaithfulness and immoral actions by pleading their human frailty and then seeking only God's all-encompassing mercy. Yes, God is infinitely merciful, but his mercy flows from our sincere repentance. For the scriptures often remind us that, "A humble, contrite heart, O God, you will not spurn" (Psalm 51:17).

Divine justice is not a topic most people desire to address. It's just plain scary to think that one day we will stand before the Living God who knows us through and through and sees all the mistakes of our lifetime. But without God's justice, our good and bad actions would be meaningless. We know that God wants his justice to prevail throughout the entire universe, in every community, family and individual. God wants goodness and fairness to be part of everyone's life. This naturally implies that we are to keep ourselves from being polluted by the world and from adopting a worldly mindset. We are all pulled in the direction of worldly thinking and the world's way of doing things. One of the greatest injustices we often succumb to individually is the belief that we do not need God, but are just and good and right apart from him. Very strident voices out there want to prove that we do not need God and that we can build a better world without him. It always amazes me that the wonders of creation and the beautiful photography and images captured by popular magazines and video programming give absolutely no credit to our incredible Creator God who is THE ONE responsible for such wonders.

One of these strident voices to emerge recently for the cause of "we don't need a divinity to find meaning" is the former pastor turned atheist, Ryan Bell. Bell, a 47 year old former Adventist pastor for 19 years, says he resigned his pastoral position and after experiencing "A Year Without God," now has stepped away from belief in God altogether. He now is proclaiming that he is happily living "A Life After God." According to an article by CNN, Bell is questioning the problem of evil and God's general silence and inactivity and says that he had to face the very real possibility that God does not exist. Bell avers, "My experience is that acknowledging the absence of God has helped me refocus on the wonderful and unlikely life I do have. (He is divorced with two children and currently works for the University of Southern California, directing their Secular Student Fellowship.) Bell explains, "I want to experience as much happiness and pleasure as I can while helping others attain their happiness." He continues, "Without depending on a cosmic savior who is coming to rescue us, we are free to recognize that we are the one we're waiting for." Personally, I find this philosophy very self-serving and, of course, very transitory. Life passes quickly. The days speed by. If this is all there is, then seeking as much so-called "happiness," or pleasure from our day to day existence, seems to be our ultimate goal. I can say for myself, this would never be enough to fill my heart. There has to be more to life than just what we see, feel, experience in the here and now. And that reality of non-ending happiness and fulfillment comes only through the Sacred Heart of Jesus who is our merciful and just savior and whose blessings begin right here and now when we entrust our lives to Him. Anyone who has experienced God's answer to their prayers, knows beyond a doubt that there is an Eternal Being in charge of the universe and that without God we are but insignificant, passing matter. A story comes to mind from my days in our Wilmington, Delaware Monastery. One of my jobs at that time was answering the front door. A dear friend of our community had come in and as she was wiping tears from her eyes, I asked her what was wrong. She told me that her neighbor, a young man about 16 years old, had just died after struggling with cancer. She looked at me in anguish and asked, "Why did God let this happen? He was so young and so full of potential..." I remember answering, "Because, Ann, this is not all there is." I will never forget her response. Stunned, she simply said, "That lifted me." Yes, we have a loving, merciful and just God who cares infinitely for each of us and wants us to spend eternity with him. But this life is the stepping-stone to our true happiness.

The reality of a just and merciful Redeemer is clearly exhibited in the writings of both Saint Margaret Mary and Saint Faustina Kowalska. Saint Margaret Mary who writes compellingly of the love of Christ's Sacred Heart also writes of His supreme justice. Consider, for example, this passage taken from her *Autobiography*:

My royal Master gave me to understand that, whenever he felt like washing his hands of any souls he wanted me to suffer for, he'd treat me like a damned soul, letting me experience the loneliness that comes over it at the hour of death. I've never met with anything so terrible—there just aren't any words to describe it.

Once, when I was working by myself, I was shown a nun—a nun who was still alive. "Look here, now!" I distinctly heard a voice saying. "Here's a nun who is a religious in name only. My Heart is just about sick of her and on the point of leaving her to herself." It was a moment of such awful terror, I fell flat on my face. I stayed like that for some time, I simply couldn't move. I volunteered to suffer whatever God's justice demanded, as long as he wouldn't forsake this soul. It seemed then as though God's justice was being turned against me—nothing but frightful agony and loneliness, and a crushing weight on my shoulders. If I looked up, I'd see an angry God equipped with rods and scourges preparing to descend upon me...

Now compare these words of the Lord to Saint Faustina's messages recorded in her *Diary*:

- When sinful souls "bring all My graces to naught, I begin to be angry with them, leaving them alone and giving them what they want." (#1728)
- Those who run away from My Merciful Heart will fall into the hands of My Justice. (#1728)
- I do not want to punish aching mankind, but I desire to heal it, pressing it to My Merciful Heart. I use punishment when they themselves force Me to do so; My hand is reluctant to take hold of the sword of justice. (#1588)
- My Mercy does not want this, but justice demands it. (#20 / concerning the purification of the souls in purgatory)

Many people today do not believe that there are consequences to their actions. Emotions and confusing thoughts well up within them and before they truly consider the effects of these, they act rashly and compulsively. Yet, we have a merciful redeemer who is ever ready to welcome us back again if we but acknowledge and atone for our mistakes. God's justice demands making right our blunders. And the Sacred Heart of Jesus is waiting to embrace us and bless us abundantly when we do. +

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