

# St. Margaret Mary's GREATEST WORK OF PRAYER: THE HOLY HOUR

## Dear Friends of the Sacred Heart,

Some years ago we had the opportunity to listen to a set of tapes in our refectory (where we eat our meals) given by a Benedictine sister who lived as a hermit. In her solitary "trailer" hermitage she wrote about silence, solitude, and prayer and confessed that of all her duties as a hermit, prayer was the hardest. She candidly confessed that she would gladly involve herself in any manual chores or write any amount of correspondence, yet when it came time to lay aside these activities for prayer, her inner resources would somehow fail her... anything but prayer!

This seems rather an odd thing to say especially coming from a contemplative religious. On the other hand, we know from the classical spiritual masters that prayer is not always filled with sweet consolations. Sometimes it is and having those sweet encounters with the Lord are certainly grace-filled boosts for our continuing moments of prayerful encounter. However, as much as we may wish to emulate the mystical favors of a Saint Faustina, or Teresa of Avila, or Margaret Mary Alacoque, each of us comes to prayer as our own person, and frankly, as a very poor person at that, who must wait upon the Lord's good graces, even while humbly trying to do our part in preparation for His coming.

I vividly recall a scene which I liked so much from a video series on Saint Teresa of Avila. In it Teresa was portrayed in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament and felt compelled to sing in front of the Real Presence. Her choice of song was the Church's ancient hymn "Veni Creator," or "Come Holy Spirit." She intuited correctly the scriptural basis of this prayer: "We do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit helps us in our weakness with words that cannot be expressed in speech." Saint Margaret Mary, too, received wonderful advice from her novice mistress in regard how to pray well: "Place yourself as a blank canvas before the Lord and allow Him 'to write' upon your soul." So the saints remind us that knowing ourselves to be poor without the help of God's Holy Spirit, we nonetheless, betake ourselves to prayer because it is the sure means of our hoped-for union with God.

In directing those who were under his spiritual care, our holy founder Saint Francis de Sales took into consideration each person's uniqueness. For those who were unaccustomed to long periods of prayer, he recommended short ejaculations said at the quarter hours, gently recalling to mind God's abiding presence throughout the day. His emphasis was not so much on the length of prayer, but on the quality of 'heart-presence.'

So it was that in the life of one of his spiritual daughters a special kind of prayer-form was introduced to the great repertory of prayer: that of the Holy Hour. The emergence of this prayer practice actually stemmed directly from Jesus Himself. In a revelation that probably dates from around the year 1673, Saint Margaret Mary writes about Jesus' request: "My Divine Master bade me rise every Thursday night at the hour He would appoint (the hour marked was 11 pm. to midnight), in order to recite five 'Our Fathers' and five 'Hail Marys,' prostrate on the earth, together with five acts of adoration which He taught me, thus to render homage to Him in the extreme anguish He suffered on the night of His Passion."

It is interesting to note that this request made upon Saint Margaret Mary by the Lord did not go without its mark of contradiction. The Superior, at first, did not allow her to comply with the wish of the Sacred Heart and consequently, Margaret Mary fell dangerously ill. Only after permission was granted to resume her holy hour did she gain full restoration of her health. Again, a few years later, a similar incident occurred. A new superior, thinking to test her virtue, forbade her to rise anymore at night. "The Sister humbly obeyed. Our Lord was much displeased with this prohibition and made it so clearly known to Margaret Mary, that she felt obliged to inform the superior of it. She was afraid, she said, that the superior would be punished. A few days later, indeed, a young Sister, a valuable subject, to whom the superior was much attached, died in the convent. The superior saw in it the punishment with which Margaret Mary had respectfully threatened her. She was now no longer in doubt of the supernatural character of what was going on in the soul of the Saint, and allowed her freely to comply with the desires of the Sacred Heart" [taken from Fr. Louis Verheylezoon, S.J. in his book *Devotion to the Sacred Heart*, pp.187-88].

Seen in its proper perspective, the Holy Hour is an integral part of devotion to the Sacred Heart. In Saint Margaret Mary's own experiences it was a time of great spiritual intimacy with her Lord, uniting herself with His redemptive suffering and in a mysterious, mystical way, consoling the anguished heart of the Savior, with particular emphasis on the night in the garden of Gethsemane. Reflecting on the Holy Hour's meaning, Pope Pius XI, in the papal encyclical *Miserentissimus Redemptor* (1928) asked the ever present question: "But how can we bring solace to Christ when he is already reigning in the beatitude of Heaven? To this we may answer in some words of Saint Augustine... 'Give me one who loves, and he will understand what I say.'"

There are those in our contemporary world who would view the idea of spending an hour 'consoling the Lord' as a pure waste of time. I realize that there are even some clergy and religious who dismiss such things as Benediction and Holy Hour as simply irrelevant pious practices. Unfortunately, Holy Hours are often pejoratively seen as outlets for introspective daydreaming and futile dissipation. Surely, there is always the danger that prayer can become an exercise in self-absorption, and that is why it must be coupled with the solid practice of virtue and even mortification (sacrifice) so that it does not flounder on the rocks of self-love. When we begin our Holy Hour it is good to recall the words of Jesus: "Learn of me for I am meek and humble of heart."

When I reflect on the initial Holy Hours of Saint Margaret Mary, I see how intensely the God of Creation desired to have an unconditional response of love; not half-hearted, but with all that we can give in return. Yes, the deepest longing of our hearts, that and that alone, must be reserved for the Lord. So it is this time, set aside, for contemplating particularly the recognition of Jesus' great gift, that of his sacrificial love for us, which should rise to our consciousness when praying the Holy Hour. Indeed, the words of the psalmist we make our own: "What return can I make to the Lord for all He has done for me?"

The great theme embedded then within the making of the Holy Hour as received by Saint Margaret Mary Alacoque is that of returning love for love. It is a heart to heart encounter from the very start. Perhaps we may bring our heavy burdens of daily living with us, but essentially even these need to be gently laid down and in their place we don the spiritual mantle of humble, confident attentiveness, placing our hope and trust in the One who suffered, died, and redeemed us. Following in the footsteps of that first disciple of the Holy Hour, Saint Margaret Mary, we surrender ourselves to the purifying presence of our Lord Jesus. The Holy Hour is an invitation for an ever deepening surrender of ourselves to the realities of the spiritual life where transcendent values take priority. Self-interest gives way to the awareness of atonement. We see with greater clarity the need for our own conversion and that of the world around us. Like Saint Margaret Mary, we are ushered into a new understanding - that it is God's wish to be at the very center of our hearts; God loving us 'extravagantly' and requesting our reciprocal response.

In my early days as a religious, I was blessed to have had a wonderful mentor whose words of wisdom often come to my mind even now. One of her constant sayings was that everyone has a mission in life. God gives each of us a special mission to accomplish and we are free or not to carry it through. This mission is the vocation to sow the seeds of the Kingdom of Heaven in accord with our different gifts. However, we must be equipped internally, for we cannot give what we do not have. Therefore, spiritual practices like the Holy Hour are valuable means placed at our disposal so that we may grow in our depth encounter with the Sacred Heart. For when we are closely aligned with the Heart of Christ, we receive new powers of love, new capacities to surmount our wayward tendencies, new strength to reach out in charity. As with all gifts of the Lord, there is generated a peace which this world cannot give and a mysterious inner sense of God's providential presence, guiding us through the uncertainties and bewilderments of this life.

Moreover, the Holy Hour can truly be a transformational grace in our lives. It can help us turn our defects into the virtues of the Heart of Jesus by purging our instincts of their self-centeredness. Saint Margaret Mary leaves us this thoughtful parting advice:

If you are in an abyss of resistance and opposition to the will of God, you are to throw yourself into the abyss of submission and conformity to the good pleasure of the Divine Heart of Jesus. If you are in an abyss of distraction, throw yourself into the abyss of the tranquillity of the Sacred Heart. If you are in an abyss of pride and vain self-esteem, throw yourself into the abyss of humility of the Sacred Heart. If you are in an abyss of infidelity and inconstancy, throw yourself into that of the firmness and steadfastness of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. If you are in an abyss of peevishness and anger, throw yourself into that of the meekness of the lovable Heart of Jesus...

During this year of Jubilee honoring the 100th anniversary of Saint Margaret Mary's canonization (from October 16, 2019 to October 16, 2020), may our hearts seek out the riches of the Heart of Christ that the Holy Hour offers us. Here in our monastery, we make a regular weekly Holy Hour every Thursday and Sunday at 4 p.m. (as well as on special feast days) with Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament. We also observe the First Fridays of each month with Eucharistic adoration throughout the day, beginning after our morning Mass (at 7:45 a.m.) and ending after evening Vespers. Our chapel is open to the public at this time (from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m.) and we welcome all who wish to honor the Sacred Heart of Jesus, joining us in quiet contemplation.

Finally, I cannot help but conclude with some words from another great lover of the Blessed Sacrament: Saint Peter Julian Eymard (1811-1868). Born in France he worked tirelessly to promote devotion to Eucharistic adoration, and, of course, linked it to the Sacred Heart. How saddened he was to find people who were wholly indifferent to spiritual realities. He once bemoaned the fact by saying: "In Paris today nobody insults us and people are even eager to greet us, but these people we meet are walking corpses; their hearts are paralyzed, hardened, they are no longer alive. We preach the capital truths to them, and they are not converted; we preach the awful terrors of eternity, and they are unmoved." Let us hope and pray that we can be the ones who will respond whole-heartedly to the Sacred Heart's insistent call for a return of His love. AMEN.

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*This talk on Sacred Heart spirituality was given in our Gathering Room on October 6, 2019. If you would like to attend similar presentations by the sisters, our next talks will be held on Sunday, November 3rd, 2019 at 4:00 p.m.*