

Feast of St Margaret Mary



When St Margaret Mary entered the Visitation of Paray-le-Monial in 1671 she entered into a world where the image of the heart was woven into the fabric of daily life. Saints Francis de Sales and Jeanne de Chantal spoke on almost every page of their letters and writings of living in and from the heart; of living one's life gazing on the wounded heart of Christ; of opening one's heart to God and receiving all that 'pours forth from the Sacred Heart of the Saviour's side'. Indeed, in 1611 to mark the first anniversary of the foundation of the community

St Francis de Sales had written to St Chantal:

'Truly, our little congregation is the work of the Hearts of Jesus and Mary. The dying Saviour has given birth to us through the opening of his Sacred Heart. . . . The thought God gave to me was that our Visitation house is, by God's grace, noble and important that it should have its own coat of arms. Therefore, my dear Mother, if you agree, I think we should take a single heart pierced with two arrows, enclosed in a crown of thorns and surrounded by a cross. This poor heart will be engraved with the names of Jesus and Mary.' These words were quoted by Fr Victor Braun and given to the Congregation on the 26th January, 1869.

For the Founders of The Visitation the heart was a metaphor that expressed the theology and spirituality that inspired the Order. It represented a vision of a world of hearts that Margaret Mary breathed and absorbed. The very title of the Order,

The Visitation, indicated this living from the heart as Mary's heart reached out to another's, Elizabeth's, in her need.

Margaret Mary carried into the cloister with her the wounds and suffering of childhood that her autobiography and biographies have clearly recounted. Also the context of Margaret Mary's time was a France gripped in the rigor of Jansenism - a heresy wherein God was represented as vengeful and unforgiving and whose love was conditional. Reception of the sacraments was often withheld on the grounds of a person's perceived 'unworthiness'. The doctrine of Jansenism was far removed from Jesus' plea: *'Come to me all you who labour and are overburdened and I will give you rest. Learn from me for I am gentle and humble of heart and you will find rest for you souls'*. Matt 11:28. The tenor of the times was fear of who would and who could be saved from damnation.

Before Margaret Mary's time there had been a continuous tradition of devotion to the Heart of Jesus originating from John's Gospel and which had taken a particular significance during medieval times. Margaret Mary's revelations served not only to highlight its essential nature but to 'earth' it in devotional practices with which we are all familiar. No longer was the heart simply imagery; her Revelations enfolded it: Jesus' heart burned with love for his people and from his open side 'a stream of mercy was constantly flowing' The Jansenist doctrine was outflanked.

At the Revolution all the Visitation monasteries in France were suppressed. The Sisters either departed to other European communities (to England 1804) or went 'underground'. Some like Philippine Duchesne, a novice in the Visitation of Grenoble, did this for a while but she eventually entered the Society of the Sacred Heart and was missioned to the USA. When religious tolerance was restored in the

early years of the 19thC the Visitation returned to the towns and cities from where it had been expelled but never to the original buildings the Sisters had once inhabited. In this Paray-le-Monial is the exception. It is the only monastery of the Order to which the Sisters were able to return.

The ambiance in the monastery is difficult to articulate. It is simply one of 'Presence', holy Presence. There is the parlour and enclosure door that Margaret Mary walked through in 1671 where she murmured the words of Psalm 132: 'This is my resting place forever, here have I chosen to live'; the choir where the key revelations took place and hearts were exchanged. The first Revelation took place on December 27th, feast of St John:

'... I was completely surrounded by the Divine Presence. ... I lost my sense of who I was. I abandoned myself to the Spirit, yielding my heart to the power of His love. He made me rest for a long time on his Divine Breast where he showed me the marvels of his love. Afterwards he asked for my heart. . . I begged him to take it . . .'

There are the cloisters as they were in her time and through which she walked carrying her 'secret'; the room in which she died with the marguerites that the novices painted still movingly visible; the refectory in which she sat listening to the writings of Francis and Jeanne. In the gardens there is the nut grove where Jesus appeared to her; the 'court of the Seraphim' where the angels surrounded her, and at the end of the garden the first little chapel that was consecrated to the Sacred Heart.

On September 3rd, 1873, Fr Victor Braun wrote: *'I am at Paray-le-Monial! How can I describe to you the joys of this beautiful day and all the emotions which fill my soul! It was with joyful confidence that I laid upon the body of the Blessed a golden heart containing the names of all the Sisters of the Congregation, praying your holy patroness to offer to the Heart of Jesus your hearts made golden by charity'.*

Margaret Mary's call was to give her heart; her mission was to make known Jesus' excess of love that we may learn to 'return love for love'. Her language was not sin laden (Jansenism) but love laden. What does Jesus want from any of us but our hearts and in our diverse ways to incarnate, to en flesh his love to all others? In our time Teilhard de Chardin saw the Sacred Heart as a 'cosmic fire' with an energy 'able to invade and saturate with love the whole atmosphere of the world'. As Sisters and friends of the Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary may the fire of Jesus' love in our hearts be constantly burning as our lives touch all others. In the Treatise of the Love of God Francis de Sales spoke of 'Cor ad cor loquitor' – 'heart speaks to heart', taken up two centuries later by Cardinal Newman and reflected so beautifully by Sister Rosemary Clerkin in 'A Heart for Others'. May our language be that of the heart and our lives reflect to others the inexhaustible treasure of God's Heart.

And so to the feast of St Margaret Mary, Patroness of the novitiate, and named so by Fr Victor Braun himself to the younger Sisters of the Congregation. He had clearly absorbed the teaching and life of St Margaret Mary when he said that love of the Sacred Heart was the Sisters' '*mission... and to make it loved until our last breath.*' May it be so.

Blessing on this feast day!