

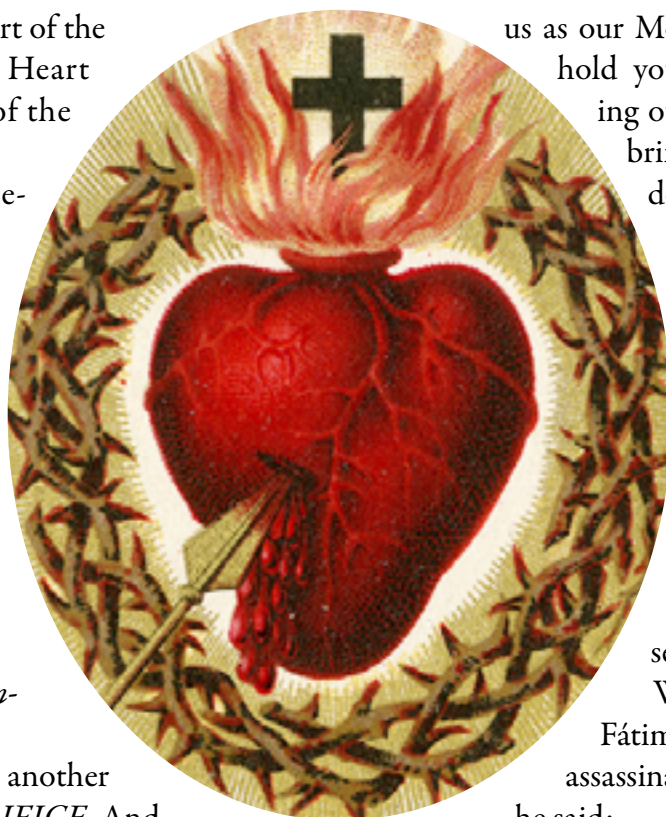
The Heart of the Gospel and Fátima

What is the heart of the Gospel? The Heart of Jesus is the heart of the Gospel. And he revealed this for us especially when he said: “Love one another as I have loved you” (John 13:34 and 15:12). Note that Christ said this not just once, but *twice* during the Last Supper and he left it to us as his last will and testament. Both times he called it a *commandment*.

How do we love one another as Jesus did? By *SACRIFICE*. And this is the one word that epitomizes the whole message delivered by our Lady at Fátima, which some have called a reaffirmation of the Gospel. Jesus expressed his love for us by sacrificing himself for sinners, unworthy of his love. Baptism conforms us to the Priesthood of Christ, and as priest-victims like Christ, we are asked to offer ourselves for sinners too.

Sinners deserve punishment — yet what do we receive? The undeserved benefit called mercy, which requires us first to recognize our own misery and to detest it. Certainly, knowing our misery gives us a clear knowledge that sin is the road to unhappiness. God’s mercy, however, makes demands on us: “Be merciful as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:36).

To remind our age of the merciful truth of the Gospel, God sent his Mother to Fátima 100 years ago in order to show us how to be merciful and so extend his merciful reign. Doing this, he also revealed the merciful graciousness of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, the most perfect fruit of the most perfectly merciful Redeemer. Mary’s Immaculate Heart was opened to



us as our Mother when Jesus said: “Woman, behold your son!” Consecrating and entrusting ourselves to Mary’s Immaculate Heart brings us closer to the cross of Christ and deeper into the fountain of redemption, fulfilling Christ’s command to us: “Behold your Mother!”

At Fátima, the Virgin Mother begged us to stop sinning and offending the good God — but not only that. She begged us to sacrifice ourselves for sinners: “Pray, pray very much, and make sacrifices for sinners; for many souls go to hell, because there are none to sacrifice themselves and to pray for them.”

When Pope St John Paul II visited Fátima for the first time, one year after the assassination attempt that nearly killed him, he said:

“In the light of a mother’s love we understand the whole message of the Lady of Fátima. The greatest obstacle to man’s journey towards God is sin, perseverance in sin, and, finally, denial of God; the deliberate blotting out of God from the world of human thought; the detachment from him of the whole of man’s earthly activity; the rejection of God by man. In reality, the eternal salvation of man is only in God. Man’s rejection of God, if it becomes definitive, leads logically to God’s rejection of man, to damnation.” (Pope St. John Paul II, 13 May 1982)

Our Lady showed the shepherd children a horrifying vision of hell, the place where “the souls of poor sinners go.” How did they react? With determination not only to make reparation for sins committed against such a good God, but also to prevent other poor sinners from suffering eternal damnation. But how did they do it?

They made the sacrifices that Jesus teaches us all to make: almsgiving, prayer and fasting (see Matt. 6). These sacrifices, however, are not reserved for some elite Christian ascetics only. Notice that Christ doesn’t say: “If you give alms...,” or “if you pray...,” or “if you

fast....” Rather he says “*WHEN* you give alms... pray... fast.” These are the demands laid on us by the Divine Mercy, to love as he loves.

But these children sought to do *more* than what is *required* and *commanded*. The love of Christ urged them to give generously. That’s what the Angel taught these children the year before our Lady visited: “Make of everything you can a sacrifice, and offer it to God as an act of reparation for the sins by which he is offended, *and in supplication for the conversion of sinners.*” Sister Lúcia once was asked if our Lady told us to pray for sinners. She answered: “For sinners, no! She told us to pray for peace, for the war to end. But for sinners, she told us to *make sacrifices.*”

Shortly after the vision of hell, little Lúcia found a piece of rough rope. She and her cousins then invented a sacrifice. The rope readily irritated their skin and so the children decided to wear a piece of the rope under their clothes so that the irritation would be a constant reminder to sacrifice themselves as Jesus did and taught. They formed their minds and hearts to consider carefully and constantly God’s love and our Lady’s desire to see sinners saved from hell. They learned that the only way to do that is to conform to the sacrificial love of Christ.

As a result of these efforts, our Lady smiled on the children. It was the only smile she gave them during six apparitions. And her maternal love intervened to prevent them from hurting themselves by penance. “God is pleased with your sacrifices,” she said. “But he does not want you to sleep with the rope on; only wear it during the day.”

And so what can *we* do to be more like Christ? Supposing our repentance from sin, we must “bear fruit that befits repentance” (Matt. 3:8) also called the works of grace. God’s grace enables us to bear fruit that serves not just our own need for redemption, but others as well. If we don’t bear this fruit, we are dead branches that will be cut off and burned. If we bury the talent we didn’t earn, and fail to make a profit with it, we will be cast out.

The sacrifices of penance also include accepting the painful blessings that God sends us. It’s easy to accept the pleasant blessings, of course. For these we offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving and consecrate them to God when we make or renew our morning offering, being



mindful throughout the day of the infinite goodness that these limited goods signify.

But when God sends us painful blessings, we can patiently endure them remembering that for us, *Christ suffered nothing unwillingly*. Father Hardon says: “By accepting [God’s] will when it crosses our own, we call it — what else? — we call it *pain*. Words cannot describe the adoration of a loving heart that sees the loving God in suffering pain.” This is the sacrifice of patience: to accept with a smile the painful blessings he gives us.

And sometimes God’s will crosses ours not in sending something painful, but by taking something from us that we love. This is the sacrifice of *surrender*, and it requires that something we love be sacrificed. If we don’t love it and it’s taken away, there’s no sacrifice, right? King David said: “I will not offer holocausts to the Lord my God which cost me nothing” (2 Sam. 24:24). We must have a very strong motive to surrender such things. The only motive strong enough is the love of God. And loving him impels us to a willingness to surrender everything he asks, even when he asks us to sacrifice ourselves for the sake of poor sinners.

Jesus told Saint Faustina: “Every conversion of a sinful soul demands sacrifice.” A few years before he said this, Jesus’ own Mother came to Fátima, to teach us and to form us as “other Christs”. How much the world needs our prayers and sacrifices! “Ordinary” Catholics won’t survive, as Father Hardon used to say. The newly canonized Saints Jacinta and Francisco are shining examples of heroic witness and the love of Christ which impels us to sacrifice ourselves for sinners.

