



How the Sacred Heart Guides Us

Dear Friends of the Sacred Heart,

The great theme of guidance in the spiritual life is very relevant for our times. We are always on the lookout for a wise piece of advice as we constantly confront new dilemmas in our lives. To be sure, guidance is needed through all our life's journeys, in matters big and small. In one resource I selected for information, there was unanimous agreement that no one could attempt the journey of life alone; those who foolishly tried were bound to frustration and failure, for we all need the guiding hands of someone. I suppose it is the ways in which we allow ourselves to be guided, and the huge variety of means that are available that can lead us into a state of confusion instead of into one of clarity and understanding. Because we are beings of both light and darkness, we are bound to be mistaken in the fine-tuned workings of the Spirit. We need to know the right way to proceed because we are creatures who seek to know 'what is.'

When I look over the whole gamut of guidance that I have received up to this point in my life, I must confess to a predominant feeling of awe. What seemed like so many loose strands have gradually assumed the form of a providentially woven pattern. I recall the words of our foundress, Saint Jane de Chantal, so beautifully set to music for the first vespers of her feast (August 12): "The measure of God's providence over us is the measure of the confidence we have in him." All along our life's pilgrimage what is needed to guide our footsteps is readily available, if we but take the proper measures to receive it. This can perhaps be illustrated in the popularization of the story/poem entitled "Footprints." The moral of that story, as we may be aware, is that none of us is ever completely alone no matter what outward appearances may otherwise indicate. We are too precious in the Lord's sight to be left abandoned; our God "Emmanuel" is with us, to carry us, as it were, even when we are least aware.

One thing of which I have a growing awareness in regard to God's guidance is that it often comes in ways and forms that tend at first to elude our basic recognition. When Scripture attests that God's ways are not our ways, and God's thoughts are not our thoughts, a sweeping glance over the course of salvation history can testify to the profound truth of that statement. God's ways are inscrutably wise, but this wisdom does not readily strike us as such when it erupts into our carefully laid plans. Someone once portrayed God's providence as shattered glass strewn over the ground waiting for the touch of the Divine Creator to refashion something yet more significant from the broken pieces.

If the Lord's help is close at hand, why then must we not perceive it immediately? Perhaps the answer lies in the season of Advent which is upon us. Consider what Saint Charles Borromeo is telling us in a reflection for the first week (Monday) of Advent: "This holy season teaches us that Christ's coming was not only for the benefit of his contemporaries; his power has still to be communicated to us all; when we remove all obstacles to his presence he will come, at any hour and moment, to dwell spiritually in our hearts." So the clarity of our perceptions, their spiritual depth, is strongly linked to how attentive we become to the Lord's presence in our lives, how totally centered we are on the realities of God. The more focussed we become, the more that presence will be a guiding force to steer our paths in providential ways.

Our sister and saint Margaret Mary experienced this powerful sense of God's grace guiding her way. Though she admits in her autobiography that she was constantly prone to doubt her revelations, she received outward signs of consolation and assurance from her spiritual director (Claude la Colombiere, S.J.). To him, her life reinforced the truth of God's good spirit working in her heart. Sufferings and setbacks only intensified the light which shone from her inner soul. God was at work to the discerning eyes of those who were providentially placed in her path to guide her.

Although Saint Margaret Mary's spiritual journey was aided by the light of divine revelation, she, like the rest of humanity, needed to make an interior resolution to trust in the mysterious unfolding of God's plan in her life. As with all saints, her holiness deepened to the degree of her trust and confidence and surrender. Seeing God's presence in all things, in every circumstance which entered her life, she became a living receptacle for the graces of Christ's heart. And, interiorly, the relationship of love and intimacy which she developed with her God, fortified her for her arduous life's mission. Her troubles did not cease as this relationship deepened, but her inner being understood that with God's guidance no obstacles of whatever magnitude could separate her from the Heart of God. Thus, we can learn from her spiritual legacy. Turning to the Heart of Christ won't guarantee that our perplexing problems will fade away, or that we will accrue big dividends in the bank of this world's goods. We are just not promised these things by the Lord and ultimately, they are empty treasures. All true guidance from the Heart of Christ prepares our hearts to receive that peace which surpasses all human understanding. Contained within this peace are the seeds of contemplative vision, enabling us to see beneath the surface of events, to see through the illusion and false claims of human systems, to see beyond the immediate and transient into the depths of reality. It allows us to see with the eyes of God; to see truthfully and lovingly. A contemporary writer calls it "a love not sentimental or naive; but one which undermines oppression and burns away illusion and falsehood, a love which has been through the fire, a love which has been purified by struggle. It is a love which has known solitude and despair."

Furthermore, I think it may be true that God sometimes guides us by our 'repugnances,' by those things that are not necessarily to our liking. This has happened in the lives of many a saint and many an ordinary person as well. I think of the famous episode of Saint Margaret Mary and her aversion to the eating of cheese (which was a family trait). So ill-disposed was she in this regard that upon her entrance to the monastery, it was specifically requested that she not be served this food. However this important request somehow got overlooked and our sister was confronted with eating what she detested many a time. She consumed the deadly stuff each time out of the sheer desire to prove her love for her Beloved. There is also the well known story of Saint Therese of Lisieux who sat close to someone in chapel who had the habit of continually clanging her rosary beads. Therese confesses that this action was enough to bring her to a cold sweat as she strove to overcome her distraction. At times like these, which we all undergo to different degrees, God may be trying to build up our arsenal of patient endurance which is so essential for any long term commitment in the spiritual life.

There will always be a mysterious dimension to the way God guides us. Even though we may think we perfectly understand what God wants of us or how God is working in our lives, still, there are myriads of ways that the Holy Spirit works. That said, we can underscore the importance of clarity in the 'long' picture of things. God sees everything, while we as limited humans see only partially. This brings us only the hope that what we see, will reach fulfillment in the end. How things ultimately turn out is not always in our control. Isaiah the prophet (whose readings we hear so frequently during this season of Advent) says it best: "I will lead the blind by ways they have not known, along unfamiliar paths I will guide them, I will turn darkness into light before them and make rough places smooth. These things I will do; I will not forsake them" [New International Version / Isaiah 42: 16]. Many times as we travelled the highways and byways of New England looking for property to build this monastery (over twenty years ago) we used to repeat these words from Isaiah, praying that the new roads we were travelling on would lead us to our rendezvous point, and they always did. We would inevitably reach our appointed destination just in the nick of time.

Also, let us not forget that nothing favors the opening of the heart of God more than our stillness. To be still requires a great sacrifice for most of us who are pulled in so many directions. The workaholic mentality knows no bounds as the human spirit pushes itself to the limits. Yet God does provide refreshment in the desert places of our hearts if only we can take that moment of silence to hear the voice within. The whole trust of the Advent liturgical season is a constant reminder that God is doing great things for us, even when we ourselves are immobile. Of course, this is not an invitation to sluggishness or apathy or indifference. But the honest to goodness truth is that feverish human activity usually goes awry at some point unless we put on the brakes of moderation.

Finally, we must remember how easy it is to become the prey of the false guides of this world who allure us by inflating our natural vanities. However, the Heart of Christ invites us to come and learn from his humble heart and to experience an unfathomable gift that this world cannot offer. The great Russian writer Fyodor Dostoyevsky captures something of the tenor of it in his classic work *The Brothers Karamazov*:

At some ideas you stand perplexed, especially at the sight of men's sins, uncertain whether to combat it by force or by humble love. Always decide, 'I will combat it by humble love'. If you make up your mind about that once and for all, you can conquer the whole world. Loving humbly is a terrible force; it is the strongest of all and there is nothing like it.

As we enter more deeply into the Advent/Christmas season may the incarnational graces of the nativity of Christ our Savior guide us into a sure place of peace and light, giving us the wisdom to know that all our days are in his hands. †

This talk on Sacred Heart Spirituality was given in our Gathering Room on December 4th, 2016. If you would like to attend similar presentations by the Sisters, our next talk will be held on Sunday, February 5th, 2017 at 4:00 p.m.