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Feast of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus

Audio recording and text of "Finding Peace in the Heart of Christ," a homily given by Saint Josemaria on 17 June 1966, the feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, which the Church celebrates this Friday.

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Image: *"Allegory of the Sacred Heart" by Federico Laorga, in the Shrine of Torreciudad.*

1. God our Father has seen fit to grant us, in the heart of his Son, "infinite treasures of love," mercy and affection. If we want to find evidence that God loves us — that he not only listens to our prayers but anticipates them — we need only follow the same line of thought as St Paul: "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things in him?" (Rom 8:32).

Grace renews a man from within and converts a sinner and rebel into a good and faithful servant. The source of all grace is God's love for us, and he has revealed this not just in words but also in deeds. It was divine love which led the second Person of the Most Holy Trinity, the Word, the Son of God the Father, to take on our flesh, our human condition, everything except sin. And the Word, the Word of God, is the Word from which Love proceeds.

Love is revealed to us in the incarnation, the redemptive journey which Jesus Christ made on our earth, culminating in the supreme sacrifice of the cross. And on the cross it showed itself through a new sign: "One of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water" (*Jn 19:34*). This water and blood of Jesus speak to us of a self-sacrifice brought to the last extreme: "It is finished" (*Jn 19:30*) — everything is achieved, for the sake of love.

Today when we consider once more the central mysteries of our faith, we are surprised to see how very human gestures are used to express the deepest truths: the love of God the Father who gives up his Son, and the Son's love which calmly leads him to Calvary. God does not approach us in power and authority. No, he "takes the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of man" (*Phil 2:7*). Jesus

is never distant or aloof. although sometimes in his preaching he seems very sad, because he is hurt by the evil men do. However, if we watch him closely, we will note immediately that his anger comes from love. It is a further invitation for us to leave infidelity and sin behind. "Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord God, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?" (*Ezek 18:23*). These words explain Christ's whole life. They allow us to understand why he has come to us with a heart made of flesh, a heart like ours. This is a convincing proof of his love and a constant witness to the mystery of divine charity.

2. I must confide to you something which makes me very sorry and spurs me on to action: the thought of all those people who do not yet know Christ, who do not even suspect the great good fortune which awaits us

in heaven. They live like blind men looking for a joy whose real name they don't know, lost on roads which take them away from true happiness. How well one understands what Paul the Apostle must have felt that night in Troas when he had a vision in a dream: "A man of Macedonia was standing beseeching him and saying Come over to Macedonia and help us. And when he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on to Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them" (*Acts 16:9-10*).

Don't you also feel that God is calling us? Through the things which happen around us he is urging us to proclaim the good news of the coming of Jesus. Yet sometimes we Christians turn our calling into something very paltry. We become superficial and waste our time in dissension and jealousy. Or, worse still, some people are artificially

scandalized by the way others choose to live certain aspects of the faith. Instead of doing all they can to help others, they set out to destroy and criticise. It is true that sometimes you find serious shortcomings in Christians' lives. But the important thing is not ourselves and our shortcomings. The only thing that matters is Jesus. It is Christ we must talk about, not ourselves.

These reflections have been provoked by suggestions that there is a crisis in devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. But there is no crisis. True devotion to the Sacred Heart has always been and is still truly alive, full of human and supernatural meaning. It has led and still leads to conversion, self-giving, fulfilment of God's will and a loving understanding of the mysteries of the redemption.

However, we must distinguish this genuine devotion from displays of useless sentimentality, a veneer of piety devoid of doctrine. No less than you, I dislike sugary statues, figures of the Sacred Heart which are incapable of inspiring any trace of devotion in people who have the common sense and supernatural outlook of a Christian. But it is bad logic to turn these particular abuses — which are disappearing anyway — into some sort of doctrinal, theological problem.

If a crisis does exist, it is a crisis in men's hearts. Men are short-sighted, selfish and narrow-minded. They fail to appreciate the great depth of Christ's love for us. Ever since the holy Church instituted today's feast, the liturgy has offered us the nourishment of true piety by including among the readings a text from St Paul. In it he proposes to us a whole program of contemplative life

— knowledge and love, prayer and life — beginning with this devotion to the Heart of Jesus. God himself invites us in the Apostle's words to follow this way: "May Christ dwell in your hearts through faith; may you, being rooted and grounded in love, have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God" (*Eph 3:17-19*).

The fullness of God is revealed and given to us in Christ, in the love of Christ, in Christ's heart. For it is the heart of Him in whom "the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily." (*Col 2:9*) Were we to lose sight of this great plan of God — the overflow of love in the world through the incarnation, the redemption and Pentecost — we could not

understand the refinement with which our Lord deals with us.

3. Let us realize all the richness hidden in the words "the Sacred Heart of Jesus." When we speak of a person's heart, we refer not just to his sentiments, but to the whole person in his loving dealings with others. In order to help us understand divine things, Scripture uses the expression "heart" in its full human meaning, as the summary and source, expression and ultimate basis, of one's thoughts, words and actions. A man is worth what his heart is worth...

To the heart belongs joy: "let my heart rejoice in your saving help" (*Ps* 12:6); repentance: "my heart is like wax, it is melted within my breast" (*Ps* 21:15); praise of God: "my heart overflows with a goodly theme" (*Ps* 44:2) the decision to listen to the Lord: "my heart is ready,

Lord" (*Ps* 56:8); loving vigilance: "I slept, but my heart was awake" (*Cant* 5:2); and also doubt and fear: "let not your hearts be troubled, believe in me" (*Jn* 14:1).

The heart not only feels, it knows and understands. God's law is received in the heart (cf *Ps* 39:9) and remains written there (cf *Prov* 7:3). Scripture also adds: "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks (*Mt* 12:34)." Our Lord reproaches the scribes: "Why do you think evil in your hearts?" (*Mt* 9:4) And, summing up all the sins a person might commit, he says: "Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander and blasphemy" (*Mt* 15:19).

When holy Scripture refers to the heart, it does not refer to some fleeting sentiment of joy or tears. By heart it means the personality which directs its whole being, soul and

body, to what it considers its good, as Jesus himself indicated: "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (*Mt 6:21*).

So when we talk about the heart of Jesus, we stress the certainty of God's love and the truth of his commitment to us. When we recommend devotion to the sacred heart, we are recommending that we should give our whole self to Jesus, to the whole Jesus — our soul, our feelings and thoughts, our words and actions, our joys.

That is what true devotion to the Heart of Jesus means. It is knowing God and ourselves. It is looking at Jesus and turning to him, letting him encourage and teach and guide us. The greatest superficiality that can beset this devotion would be a lack of humanity, a failure to understand the reality of an incarnate God.

4. Jesus on the cross, with his Heart overflowing with love for men, is such an eloquent commentary on the value of people and things that words only get in the way. Men, their happiness and their life, are so important that the very Son of God gave himself to redeem and cleanse and raise them up. "Who will not love this Heart so wounded?" a contemplative asks in this connection. "Who will not return love for love? Who will not embrace a heart so pure? We, who are made of flesh, will repay love with love. We will embrace our wounded one, whose hands and feet ungodly men have nailed; we will cling to his side and to his heart. Let us pray that we be worthy of linking our heart with his love and of wounding it with a lance, for it is still hard and impenitent" (St Bonaventure, *Vitis mystica*, 3,11 – PL 184,643).

These are thoughts, affections and conversations which souls in love with Jesus have offered him from the beginning. But if we are to understand this language, if we are really to know the heart of man, Christ's heart and the love of God, we need both faith and humility. We need the faith and humility that prompted St Augustine to write: "You have made us for you, O Lord, and restless will our heart be until it rests in you" (*Confessions*, 1,1,1 – PL 32,661).

If a man is not humble, he will try to make God his own, but not in the divine way which Christ made possible when he said: "Take, eat; this is my body" (*1 Cor* 11:24). The proud man tries to confine the grandeur of God within human limits. Then reason, the cold, blind reason that is so different from the mind imbued with faith and even from the well-directed mind of someone capable of

enjoying and loving things, becomes irrational in a person's attempt to reduce everything to his cramped human experience.

Thus is superhuman truth impoverished, and man's heart develops a crust that makes it insensitive to the action of the Holy Spirit. Our limited intelligence would be completely at a loss then if the merciful power of God did not break down the barriers of our wretchedness. "A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh" (*Ezek* 36:26). Only with God's help will the soul see again and be filled with joy on hearing the promises of sacred Scripture.

"I know the plans I have for you, plans for peace and not affliction" (*Jer* 29:11) was God's

promise through Jeremiah. The liturgy applies these words to Jesus, for in him we are clearly shown that God does love us in this way. He did not come to condemn us, to accuse us of meanness and smallness. He came to save us, pardon us, excuse us, bring us peace and joy. If only we realize the wonderful way in which God deals with his children, our hearts must change. We will see opening up before us an absolutely new panorama, full of relief, depth and light.

5. But note that God does not say: "In exchange for your own heart, I will give you a will of pure spirit." No, he gives us a heart, a human heart, like Christ's. I don't have one heart for loving God and another for loving people. I love Christ and the Father and the Holy Spirit and our Lady with the same heart with which I love my parents and my friends. I shall never tire of repeating this. We

must be very human, for otherwise we cannot be divine.

Human love, the love we experience on earth when it is really genuine, helps us to savour divine love. That is how we grasp the love by which we rejoice in God and which we will share in heaven when the Lord is "everything to everyone" (*1 Cor* 15:28). If we begin to understand God's love, we will feel impelled to become increasingly more compassionate, more generous, more dedicated.

We must give what we receive, we must teach what we learn. Very simply, without any kind of conceit, we must help others to share in the knowledge of God's love. As you go about your work, doing your job in society, each of you can and should turn your occupation into a real service. Your work should be done well, mindful of others' needs, taking

advantage of all advances in technology and culture. Such work fulfils a very important function and is useful to the whole of humanity, if it is motivated by generosity, not selfishness, and directed to the welfare of all, not our own advantage, if it is filled with the christian sense of life.

Through your work, through the whole network of human relations, you ought to show the charity of Christ and its concrete expression in friendship, understanding, human affection and peace. Just as Christ "went about doing good" (*Acts 10:38*) throughout Palestine, so must you also spread peace in your family circle, in civil society, on the job, and in your cultural and leisure activities. This will be the best proof that the kingdom of God has reached your heart. As St John wrote: "We know that we have passed out of

death into life, because we love the brethren" (1 Jn 3:14).

But no one can live out this love unless he is taught in the school of the heart of Jesus. Only if we watch and contemplate the heart of Jesus will we ensure that our heart is freed from hatred and indifference. Only in this way will we know how to react as Christians to the pain and sufferings of others.

Do you remember the scene St Luke depicts when Jesus is approaching Naim? Jesus crosses paths again with a crowd of people. He could have passed by or waited until they called him. But he didn't. He took the initiative, because he was moved by a widow's sorrow. She had just lost all she had, her son.

The evangelist explains that Jesus was moved. Perhaps he even showed signs of it, as when Lazarus died. Jesus Christ was not, and is not,

insensitive to the suffering that stems from love. He is pained at seeing children separated from their parents. He overcomes death so as to give life, to reunite those who love one another. But at the same time, he requires that we first admit the pre-eminence of divine love, which alone can inspire genuine christian living.

Christ knows he is surrounded by a crowd which will be awed by the miracle and will tell the story all over the countryside. But he does not act artificially, merely to make an effect. Quite simply he is touched by that woman's suffering and cannot keep from consoling her. So he goes up to her and says, "Do not weep" (*Lk 7:13*) It is like saying: "I don't want to see you crying; I have come on earth to bring joy and peace." And then comes the miracle, the sign of the power of Christ who is God. But first came his compassion, an evident sign

of the tenderness of the heart of Christ the man.

6. If we don't learn from Jesus, we will never love. If, like some people, we were to think that to keep a clean heart, a heart worthy of God, means "not mixing it up, not contaminating it" with human affection, we would become insensitive to other people's pain and sorrow. We would be capable only of an "official charity," something dry and soulless. But ours would not be the true charity of Jesus Christ, which involves affection and human warmth. In saying this, I am not supporting the mistaken theories — pitiful excuses — which misdirect hearts away from God and lead them into occasions of sin and perdition.

On today's feast we should ask our Lord to give us a good heart, capable of having compassion for other people's pain. Only with such a heart can we realize that the true balm for

the suffering and anguish in this world is love, charity. All other consolations hardly even have a temporary effect and leave behind them bitterness and despair.

If we want to help others, we must love them — I insist — with a love clothed in understanding, dedication, affection and voluntary humility. Then we will understand why our Lord summed up the whole law in that double commandment, which is really just one: love of God, and love of one's neighbour, with all our heart.

Maybe you are thinking that sometimes Christians — not just other people, you and I — forget the most elementary applications of this duty. Perhaps you bring to mind all the injustices which cry for redress, all the abuses which go uncorrected, the discrimination passed on from

one generation to the next with no attempt to find permanent solutions.

I cannot propose to you a particular way to solve problems of this kind, there is no reason why I should. But, as a priest of Jesus Christ, it is my duty to remind you of what sacred Scripture says. Meditate on the scene of the judgment which Jesus himself has described: "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food; I was thirsty and you gave me no drink; naked and you did not clothe me; sick and in prison and you did not visit me" (*Mt 25:41-43*).

A man or a society that does not react to suffering and injustice and makes no effort to alleviate them is still distant from the love of Christ's heart. While Christians enjoy the fullest freedom in finding and applying various solutions to these

problems, they should be united in having one and the same desire to serve mankind. Otherwise their Christianity will not be the word and life of Jesus; it will be a fraud, a deception of God and man.

7. But I have still a further consideration to put before you. We have to fight vigorously to do good, precisely because it is difficult for us men to resolve seriously to be just, and there is a long way to go before human relations are inspired by love and not hatred or indifference. We should also be aware that even if we achieve a reasonable distribution of wealth and a harmonious organization of society, there will still be the suffering of illness, of misunderstanding, of loneliness, of the death of loved ones, of the experience of our own limitations.

Faced with the weight of all this, a Christian can find only one genuine

answer, a definitive answer: Christ on the cross, a God who suffers and dies, a God who gives us his heart opened by a lance for the love of us all. Our Lord abominates injustice and condemns those who commit it. But he respects the freedom of each individual. He permits injustice to happen because, as a result of original sin, it is part and parcel of the human condition. Yet his heart is full of love for men. Our suffering, our sadness, our anguish, our hunger and thirst for justice... he took all these tortures on himself by means of the cross.

Christian teaching on pain is not a series of facile considerations. It is, in the first place, a call to accept the suffering inseparable from all human life. I cannot hide from you the fact that there has often been pain in my life and more than once I have wanted to cry. I tell you this joyfully, because I have always

preached and tried to live the truth that Christ, who is love, is to be found on the cross. At other times, I have felt a great revulsion to injustice and evil, and I have fought against the frustration of not being able to do anything — despite my desire and my effort — to remedy those unjust situations.

When I speak to you about suffering, I am not just talking theory. Nor do I limit myself to other people's experience when I tell you that the remedy is to look at Christ, if when faced with suffering, you at some time feel that your soul is wavering. The scene of Calvary proclaims to everyone that afflictions have to be sanctified, that we are to live united to the cross.

If we bear our difficulties as Christians, they are turned into reparation and atonement. They give us a share in Jesus' destiny and in his

life. Out of love for men he volunteered to experience the whole gamut of pain and torment. He was born, lived and died poor. He was attacked, insulted, defamed, slandered and unjustly condemned. He knew treachery and abandonment by his disciples. He experienced isolation and the bitterness of punishment and death. And now the same Christ is suffering in his members, in all of humanity spread throughout the earth, whose head and firstborn and redeemer he is.

Suffering is part of God's plans. This is the truth, however difficult it may be for us to understand it. It was difficult for Jesus Christ the man to undergo his passion: "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; nevertheless not my will, but yours be done" (*Lk 22:42*). In this tension of pleading and acceptance of the Father's will, Jesus goes calmly

to his death, pardoning those who crucify him.

This supernatural acceptance of suffering was, precisely, the greatest of all conquests. By dying on the cross Jesus overcame death. God brings life from death. The attitude of a child of God is not one of resignation to a possibly tragic fate; it is the sense of achievement of someone who has a foretaste of victory. In the name of this victorious love of Christ, we Christians should go out into the world to be sowers of peace and joy through everything we say and do. We have to fight — a fight of peace — against evil, against injustice, against sin. Thus do we serve notice that the present condition of mankind is not definitive. Only the love of God, shown in the heart of Christ, will attain the glorious spiritual triumph of men.

8. Previously we referred to what happened at Naim. We could recall other examples, for the Gospel is full of such scenes. Each incident reveals not only the sincere gesture of a man who suffers when his friends suffer, but above all the immense charity of our Lord. Jesus' heart is the heart of God made flesh, the heart of Emmanuel, God with us.

"The Church, united to Christ, is born of a wounded heart." From this heart, opened wide, life is transmitted to us. Here we must, even if only in passing, recall the sacraments through which God works in us and makes us sharers in the redeeming strength of Christ. How can we not recall with particular gratitude the blessed Sacrament of the Eucharist, the holy sacrifice of Calvary and its constant bloodless renewal in our Mass? Jesus actually gives himself to us as food. Because he comes to us, everything is

changed. Our being acquires new strength — the assistance of the Holy Spirit — which fills our soul, affects all our actions, our way of thinking and feeling. Christ's heart means peace for Christians.

The source of the self-giving which our Lord asks of us is not merely our own desire or effort, often feeble and inconstant. This life is supported primarily by the graces won for us by the loving heart of God made man. That is why we can and should keep going in our interior life as children of our Father God who is in heaven, without giving way to discouragement or depression. I like to ask people to consider how a Christian, in his ordinary daily life, in the simplest details, can put faith, hope and charity into practice. There lies the essence of the conduct of a man who relies on divine help. And in the practice of these theological

virtues he will find joy, strength and peace.

These are the fruits of the peace of Christ, the peace brought to us by his Sacred Heart. Let us say it once again: the love of Jesus for men is an unfathomable aspect of the divine mystery, of the love of the Son for the Father and the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, the bond of love between the Father and the Son, encounters in the Word a human heart.

It is impossible to speak of these central facts of our faith without feeling the limitations of our minds and the greatness of revelation. Yet even if we cannot fully grasp these truths that overawe our reason, we believe them humbly and firmly. backed by the testimony of Christ, we know they are true. We know that Love in the depths of the Trinity is poured out on men by the love in the heart of Christ.

9. Living in Christ's heart, being closely united to him means, therefore, that we become a dwelling place of God. "He who loves me, my Father will also love," (cf *Jn* 14:21) our Lord told us. And Christ and the Father in the Holy Spirit come to the soul and make their home there (cf *Jn* 14:23).

Even if we only give a little thought to these basic ideas, our whole attitude changes. We become hungry for God, and we make our own the words of the psalm: "My God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where no water is" (cf *Ps* 62:2). And Jesus, who has encouraged this feeling of emptiness in us, comes out to meet us and says: "If anyone thirst, let him come to me and drink" (*Jn* 7:37). He offers us his heart, so that we can find there both rest and strength. If we accept his invitation, we will see that his words are true.

And our hunger and thirst will increase to the point that we desire God really to inhabit our soul and never to take his light and warmth away from us.

"I came to cast fire upon the earth; and would that it were already kindled" (*Lk 12:29*). We have approached the fire of the love of God. Let us allow that fire to burn our lives. Let us feed the desire to spread that divine fire throughout the world, making it known to all the people around us. They too can experience the peace of Christ and find happiness there. A Christian who lives united to Christ's heart can have no goals but these: peace in society, peace in the Church, peace in his soul, the peace of God which will reach its climax when his kingdom comes.

Mary, you are Queen of Peace, because you had faith and believed

that what the angel announced would in fact happen. Help us to grow in the faith, to have a firm hope and a deeper love. For that is what your Son wants of us this day, that is why he shows us his Sacred Heart.

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