

St. Anthony Claret and the Immaculate Heart of Mary

I'd like to begin by relating a story, a lesson I learned, while teaching 7th grade this past semester. It was my first semester ever teaching and so I had all of these great ideas of how I was going to teach the material and great projects that we were going to do. About half way through the semester we began our unit on Our Lady. I had great ideas how I was going to teach the students various Marian topics: Mary being conceived without original sin, Mary being assumed into Heaven, why we as Catholics say that Mary is Mother of God, etc., etc. However, on the first day of the unit I thought that I would give them a chance to tell me what they already knew about Our Lady. Immediately the entire class raised their hands, so I called on one young girl: "Mary is the Immaculate Conception, meaning she was conceived without original sin." "Very good. What else do you know?" Again every hand shot up and the second student answered: "Mary was assumed body and soul into heaven." This time I heard a few sighs and some said "But I was going to say that." So I asked again, thinking surely there is something they don't know, but again every hand went up and the third student said: "Mary is the Mother of God because she is the Mother of Jesus and Jesus is God." We continued like this for about thirty minutes. I was happy that they knew all of these things, but as you can maybe imagine the wind came out of my sails a little bit, so I went back to the drawing board. As I was re-planning the unit one thought kept coming back to me: they knew the facts, but do they know Mary? Do they know who she is? And if who a person is resides in their interior, in their heart, then my job is to introduce them to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. That remained my focus for the rest of the unit, and I was very pleased with what the students took away from it. Interestingly, I find myself in a similar situation tonight. I am in a room of good Catholics who presumably know the facts or have the resources to easily find them and so my focus is to present some ways in

which we can foster or enhance our relationship with the Immaculate Heart of Mary. I think our saint tonight, St. Anthony Mary Claret, will lead the way.

First of all we'll take a little look at who this saint is. St. Anthony Claret is a lesser known saint. He grew up in a small village in 19th century Spain. He came from a large family and his father owned a textile factory, but his family would not have been considered very rich. Anthony was raised in a very devout household and so from his early days religion was important to him. He especially had a great devotion to Our Lady and his prized childhood possession or his "security blanket" was a Rosary that was given to him as a young boy. However, what made Anthony particularly unique was his natural inclination to think. He was a very interior, introverted man and was always thinking about something, a conversation he had just had, what he was going to do tomorrow, how to solve the world's problems. Those of us who have this inclination and temperament can certainly relate with Anthony on this point. Throughout his entire life before drifting off to sleep, he would simply lie in bed and think. He would think about all sorts of things, but he always came back to the notion of eternity. How long is eternity? Why can't we imagine eternity? It is through these reflections that Anthony came to abhor the thought of anyone spending all eternity in hell. We'll come back to this idea later.

When Anthony was seventeen or eighteen, he felt that young adult urge to leave home, so he went to the big city of Barcelona and began to learn more about the manufacturing business. As it turns out, he was a natural businessman and really had a head for manufacturing textiles. He spent three years in the big city working his way up the corporate ladder before he felt the

Lord calling him to something higher. It was during this time that Anthony's father offered him a business deal. He thought if Anthony would come home, bringing his new-found knowledge with him, that he could buy into the family factory and it could be a father/son operation. However, as Anthony was trying to discern his vocation, he didn't want to make any drastic decision. On the other hand, he didn't want to let his father down either. So, being of short stature, he told his father that he didn't think the workers would listen to him. Well, I thought that most fathers would say "Don't worry about it son, they'll respect you if you earn it." But Anthony's father did not say that. He told Anthony that they would just give him a desk that was hidden away so he could do the paper work and come up with the ideas and that they would hire a big man to deal with the workers. In the end, Anthony had to tell his father about his desire to be a priest and Mr. Claret, although a little heartbroken, urged his son to follow God's call.

And follow God's call Anthony did. He quickly went to the bishop, began his seminary studies and was ordained to the priesthood in 1835. After a few years as a pastor, he began to feel the call to mission work. He could not stand the thought of anyone going to hell and he thought that he could bring more souls to Christ through this mission work. So with the permission of his bishop he began to go to neighboring parishes and dioceses to preach missions. He gave retreats to priests, religious and lay people, heard confessions, administered the sacraments, taught catechism to children and even became relatively proficient in practicing medicine. His mission work even took him out of Spain as he was consecrated Archbishop of Cuba in 1849, five days after he decided to found a community of brothers and priests devoted to mission work. And it is in this community, the Missionary Sons of the Immaculate Heart of Mary that we have a particular interest this evening.

One, while Fr. Anthony Claret was organizing this order, his good friend, Fr. Joaquin Masmitjá was finding the Daughters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, from which our community springs. These two priests were so close in fact that Fr. Masmitjá said in several of his letters to his spiritual daughters that he never made any important decision without first consulting Archbishop Anthony Claret. Therefore he has a special place in our hearts.

The second reason St. Anthony's missionary community is important to us is because by teaching these missionaries their identity as Sons of the Immaculate Heart, Anthony has left a legacy of what it means to be devoted to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Granted there is not one missionary priest in this room, but, by virtue of our common baptism, we are all called to be holy and are all called to bring Christ to others, which are exactly the two great aims of Anthony's community. And he chose to put his community under the patronage of the Immaculate Heart because, as he taught his missionaries, devotion to Mary's heart is the "most efficacious means for bringing about conversion and perseverance" (Lozano, 136).

So what exactly does Claret teach about devotion to the Immaculate Heart? It is actually summed up in what he called in his autobiography the portrait of a missionary: "A Son of the Immaculate Heart of Mary is a man on fire with love, who spreads its flames wherever he goes. He desires mightily and strives by all means possible to set the whole world on fire with God's love. Nothing daunts him; he delights in privations, welcomes work, embraces sacrifices, smiles at slander, and rejoices in suffering. His only concern is how he can best follow Jesus Christ and

imitate Him in working, suffering, and striving constantly and single-mindedly for the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls” (Claret, 494).

Now this quote is power packed so I am just going to focus on a few points, but first the overarching theme is that devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary first of all means devotion to her Son. Her heart was always focused on Him: his needs, his cares, his will. Any mother can relate to this attachment and if we are to bring Christ to others, give birth to Him in this world, like our missionary Anthony, we too must be concerned with Christ’s needs, Christ’s cares, Christ’s will.

Second, St. Anthony says that we are to strive “constantly and single-mindedly for the greater glory of God.” This idea of single-mindedness is an interesting one. St. Paul, in his letter to the Romans, tells us to “be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God” (Romans 12:2). We naturally form our minds by what is in the world around us, what I let in. It can be what I watch on television, what I read in books or what I hear others talk about. Our Lady’s mind was completely configured to that of Christ’s, because her Son and the Father’s will was what was always on her mind. Evidence of this is seen when she visits her kinswoman, Elizabeth upon hearing of her unexpected pregnancy. When Mary arrives, Elizabeth greets her with the words, “How does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” and later, “Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled” (Luke 1:43-45). And Mary, upon hearing these great words of praise immediately turns to the Lord who has always been in her thoughts, “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord” (Luke 1:46). Elizabeth was praising Mary and Mary in turn praises

the Lord. This is evidence of many virtues, but one I think is this single-mindedness about which St. Anthony is speaking.

In St. Anthony's own life we see this struggle to be single-minded. When he was in the big city as a young man trying to make his way in the business world, he let his work totally consume his thoughts. According to his autobiography he took his natural inclination to think and thought only of manufacturing and how he could be the best there is at it. Now there is nothing wrong with wanting to do good work, especially for a man, but as St. Anthony said, he was so consumed with business that he left no room for God. He still went to Mass on Sundays and even said his daily Rosary, but his thoughts were far from God. When we train our mind to think of the Lord first, when we give Him the best of our day when possible through prayer and/or good spiritual reading, He will see to our various occupations and we will see, much to our surprise, how much time we have left for our work. So a good initial step to forming a good interior, a good heart, is by this "renewal of our mind" or single-mindedness.

Once our thoughts begin to come back to Christ, our hearts cannot help but to also be changed and our love for God begins to grow. This seems to be the greatest emphasis of St. Anthony, "A Son of the Immaculate Heart of Mary is a man on fire with love." As we know from the Gospel, love of God and love of neighbor are the two greatest commands. Our Lord also tells us "as I have loved you, so you also should love one another" (John 13:34). And he loved us to the point of giving his life for us. So all love requires a little self-sacrifice. However, love is often expressed according to our personality or temperament. Some saints expressed their love through their heroic fidelity, even to giving their lives like the early Roman martyrs.

On the other hand, some like St. Francis of Assisi or St. Vincent de Paul went around doing great acts of charity, like kissing the lepers and feeding the poor. The point is that we give expression to our love. Our Lady expressed her love through acts of charity like her concern for the bride and groom at the wedding feast at Cana and her willingness to help her elderly kinswoman Elizabeth during her time of need. However, her greatest expression, the way she proved her love most profoundly was by her silent presence at the foot of the cross. She was there when her Son poured out his love for us. When he expressed his love in a most radical way, she was there thinking of Him, loving Him and suffering with Him. She wasn't asked to do anything at that moment, but just be present to her dying Son. So many times the thoughts of our hearts cannot be expressed with words and the only way we can express our love is by silently being present. The same goes with our relationship with Christ. There is a time and place for acts of charity, but also for that prayer where we express our love through silent presence.

Since Anthony was an interior man, always thinking, this silence that is ever in the presence of God was the goal and driving force of his life and missionary activity; to do everything, throughout the course of our day, for love of God and because we love Him. In his book, Mystic and Man of Action, Claretian Father, Juan Maria Lozano, quotes our saint as saying, "This is what we should aspire to; this is what we should aim at achieving. Our soul is always thinking and wishing, and its activity never ceases for an instant; we must direct it to the service of God and strive to see to it that all it does and suffers is animated by ...God" (Lozano, 152). He goes on, "you will say that this is impossible here on earth. But, how do you know this?...Love, and you will see what happens to you. When a house is burning down, you will throw everything out the window; love, burning with the fire of divine love and you will throw

out the window all those little idols you cherish so. Love, and you will see how love, once it masters your heart, will take everything else in hand” (Lozano, 152). One biblical commentator, Erasmo Merikakis, says that man’s greatest talent and treasure is his ability to love. It is what makes us like God. And if silent presence is a great expression of love then, this silent presence give a whole new meaning to Eucharistic Adoration to which we will be going in a few minutes. We can take what we have learned about this silent expression of love from Mary’s Heart and take that with us to prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. This shows us how devotion to Mary leads us to her Son. When we strive to imitate her, it will only lead us to a deeper love of Jesus.

I’d like to leave you with one final thought tonight, and it actually points to a key difference between Our Lady and St. Anthony Claret (besides the fact that one was without sin and the other was not). St. Anthony’s love and abhorrence of the thought of souls in hell for all eternity moved him to go and preach; to very literally go to the people and bring Christ to them through his teaching. This was God’s will for him. However, Mary’s great love led her to quite simply raise her Son, be a good wife to St. Joseph, and to suffer silently as Our Savior fulfilled his mission. This was God’s will for her. When we love, God will show us our part to play. This will be different for everyone and so we should form our thoughts, our attitudes, to always say: “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. Be it done unto me according to thy Word” (Luke 1:38).

Works Cited

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