



*Devotion to the Immaculate and Sorrowful Heart of Mary
according to Father Masmítja,
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The Immaculate Heart of Mary and the Conversion of Sinners

The Immaculate Heart of Mary has always been linked to the conversion of sinners. The stories connected with devotion to her Immaculate Heart are stories of conversion, which are the greatest of the miracle stories: the Miraculous Medal which has her Heart on the back, the Green Scapular which has an image of her Heart and a prayer to her Immaculate Heart for conversion, the devotion of consecration to her Heart starting in Paris, the founding of the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Spain, the apparitions of Our Lady of Fatima. All of these major events involve Our Lady pleading and working for conversion, calling us to share in this effort, and showing herself a loving Mother through the miraculous conversion of her children's hearts.

Such is the nature of her heart. She constantly intercedes for her children to get to heaven. Here's just one story that illustrates the points of tonight's talk. Alphonse Ratisbonne: "though nominally a Jew, he was a radical infidel, a scoffer at religion, and, after the conversion of his brother Theodor, a rabid enemy of everything Catholic." (Catholic Encyclopedia) He was passing through Rome and simply out of politeness stopped by the house of an acquaintance who was Catholic so as not to cause offense at neglecting this person while in Rome. The Catholic, Theodore De Bousierre, asked Ratisbonne about the faith, and was met with open scorn. Theodore argued well for the faith, but Alphonse has so much scorn that he was





unwilling even to reply or argue; he simply poked fun and laughed derisively. Finally, Theodore asked Alphonse to wear a Miraculous Medal. He judged rightly that only a dare would induce the hardened atheist to try it. Theodore challenged Alphonse to prove that holy objects are empty and ineffectual by wearing the Miraculous Medal and praying the Memorare. Alphonse accepted the challenge.

The next day the two of them went into the Church “San Andrea Della Fratte” so Theodore could make some arrangements for the funeral of a friend who had just passed away. Alphonse’s only thought was, “What an ugly Church.” When Theodore returned to Alphonse after a few minutes, he was shocked to see Alphonse kneeling, eyes open, unresponsive to the world around him, even when Theodore tried nudging him several times. At last, Alphonse turned to Theodore with tears streaming, and said, “Lead me where you please. After what I have seen, I obey.” He was unable to talk about what he had experienced and was physically weak to the point of needing assistance to walk out of the Church. When he was finally able to talk, Alphonse said that the Blessed Virgin had appeared to him in the same pose found on the Miraculous Medal. He asked for Baptism, and when the priest asked for an explanation, Alphonse replied, “All I can say is that at the moment when the Blessed Virgin made a sign of her hand, the veil fell from my eyes; not one veil only, but all the veils that were wrapped around me disappeared, just as snow melts beneath the rays of the sun.’

“The light that struck Ratisbonne in those moments had illuminated his mind to doctrines of faith, such as original sin, which he never even heard about before. The reason he so longed for Baptism was that he wanted badly to have his stain of original sin washed away. In the moments after his vision, he wept, seeing what a terrible fate he had been rescued from, but also because he saw all the rest of the family he so loved still stained with original sin.

“He would later be asked how he gained such knowledge in matters of the Faith. Ratisbonne writes, ‘All I know is that when I entered that church I was profoundly ignorant of everything, and when I



came out, I saw everything clearly and distinctly. I was like a man suddenly roused from slumber, or rather like a man born blind, whose eyes are suddenly opened. I came out of a tomb, out of an abyss, and I was living, perfectly, energetically living.”

(<https://missiomagazine.com/conversion-ratisbonne/>)

Our Lady had used a number of means to convert her son through Theodore: Intercessory prayer, love, kindness, spending time with the person, witnessing to the faith, discussing the faith, devotion to her, and yes, even trickery!

Fr. Mastitja founded our Community in Spain in 1848 to re-Christianize a society that was suffering from its divorce from the faith. In addition to teaching, he exhorted the Sisters to pray and sacrifice for the conversion of sinners. All of this is done in the context of devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, entrusting all to her and ourselves being conformed to her. He envisioned an eighth sword poised to pierce her heart. This sword was the sword of indifference, souls who didn't care, or had rejected, or wouldn't accept the redemption her Son had won for them at so great a price. Fr. Masmitjá asked the Sisters to prevent this sword from ever piercing their Mother's heart through their teaching, sacrifices and prayer.

How is it possible that so many are indifferent to Our Lord's love and mercy, His Passion and death, His offer of personal redemption? St. Ignatius' First Rule of Discernment can shed some light: "In persons who are going from mortal sin to mortal sin, the enemy is ordinarily accustomed to propose apparent pleasures to them, leading them to imagine sensual delights and pleasures in order to hold them more and make them grow in their vices and sins. In these persons the good spirit uses a contrary method, stinging and biting their consciences through their rational power of moral judgment." In those who are immersed in sin, going from sin to sin, the enemy works to get the person to ignore or be blind to the real consequences of their choices, being only aware of pleasures and delights. Do we not hear this attitude among those who wish to perdure in sin?



The evil one is practiced at distorting our vision. We see this in the beginning.

When Eve was happy in the garden with God and Adam, she saw all things accurately; she saw with divine vision. Her initial response to the serpent was, “You shall not eat it or even touch it, or else you will die” (Gen 3:3). After a short time of listening to the serpent, Genesis says, “The woman saw that the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eyes, and the tree was desirable for gaining wisdom” (Gen 3:6). See how the enemy distorts our vision, making evil things appear good and desirable, and causing us to be blind to consequences. He convinces me that I can decide for myself what is good for me, and that it is intolerant for you, or even God Himself, not to allow this.

This is the situation of so many of our brothers and sisters in the world. Why should we care about their state? Why does Our Lord and Our Lady consistently ask us to pray and sacrifice for the conversion of sinners? Part of the answer comes directly from our own hearts: These are our own friends and family members. We love these people! We desperately want Heaven for them. Do not lose heart! Our Lady loves them so much that she made sure these children of hers would have loved ones who would pray and sacrifice on their behalf. I want to say a word especially to parents. In my experience, most Catholic parents have at least one child who is resistant or has fallen away from the faith. Don’t assume there is anything wrong with you. Perhaps there is something RIGHT with you, and that is why Our Lord gave this child to you, because He knew where this precious soul would choose to travel, and Our Lord made sure he would have parents like you who would pray and sacrifice for him who refuses to pray for himself. Keep praying!

What about the souls we don’t know personally? Worrying about my salvation is difficult enough to handle! Why should I care about them? Let ‘em rot in hell! That statement is shocking, and lays bare the very reason we cannot be indifferent; a calloused heart is not a holy heart. It is not a heart like Our Lord’s nor like Our Lady’s. There are so many apparitions of Our Lady in which we see her sad and



sometimes even weeping at the sins of her children. At Fatima, when she showed the children the souls going to hell, the children were never the same. These souls were unidentifiable strangers to the children, but that mattered not; the children were gifted with divine vision, and these souls were precious. Jacinta would sit rocking with her head in her little hands contemplating the souls going to hell, which moved her to greater prayer and sacrifice for them. Our Lady can make our hearts ever more caring and generous like hers.

What specifically is needed? Bl. Basil Moreau founded the Holy Cross Fathers and the Marianite Sisters in France in the mid-1800's. He consecrated the Sisters to the Immaculate and Sorrowful Heart of Our Lady, and named Our Lady of Sorrows as the patroness of both Congregations. They were founded for the transformation, or evangelization, of society. Given his devotion to Our Lady and the charism for the conversion of sinners, I thought his summary of transformation would serve us well tonight. He taught that for a soul to be transformed, he has to be convinced that it is necessary, he has to believe it is possible, and he must be convicted that Our Lord will accompany him every step of the way. When thinking of students, family members, and so many others who need conversion, I can see that the lack of one of these elements is an obstacle to this person's conversion: it is necessary, it is possible, I will be accompanied by Our Lord.

It is difficult to admit that I need conversion. That is admitting that I am not complete, that I don't have everything under control, that I need to change. We spend so much of our time and energy, and even money, working to give the opposite impression: I have it all together, I have no needs, I have arrived. If you suggest to someone else that they need conversion, they can feel that you are attacking their very source of security. This feeling of being threatened can serve the enemy very well in delaying their conversion. Our Lady, however, can easily overcome this obstacle. If the soul knows itself to be loved and accepted by their beautiful heavenly Mother, the frees the person to be open to conversion.



The second element, to believe it is possible, is another great deterrent to conversion. We know what this is like: I know myself and my faults and the struggles I have had for years. It can appear easier to quit trying, safer to give up hope, than to hope and try and be devastated. In this, too, can't we see the enemy's gleeful distortion used to skillfully to keep us down? He points his accusing finger at us and convinces us that our sin is who we are: I AM a liar, a thief, a calloused person, a hypocrite. The truth is: I am a beloved child of God who sometimes chooses things that are bad for me and others. Our Lady can love me into a restored sense of identity. She can help me see how possible it is for me to convert. She calls me higher, into greater intimacy with her Son.

The third and final element: to be convicted that Our Lord will accompany me every step of the way. Again, we encounter the enemy's convincing lies and distortions. It is so easy for me to believe that Our Lord is disappointed in me to the point that He has left me to my own devices, and deservedly so. It is a common tendency to believe that I have to figure out my own way to Heaven, and Our Lord is watching me, and proud when I figure out things without any help, even His. I can believe that I need to fix my patterns of sin before I can be worthy enough to have an intimate relationship with Him. Some do not think Our Lord is merciful at all. Others know He is merciful but also know He is Judge, which can skew our ability to see and receive mercy. Our Lady, as always, assists us in this plight. She is all mother, and there is nothing of the judge in her. No matter where I am or what I have done, I can turn to her for comfort, mercy, love and acceptance. In turn, she will show me that her heart is a perfect reflection of her Son's, and she leads me to Him for restoration and growth. I don't ever remember being afraid of approaching my father, but I have heard sweet, entertaining stories from so many who were afraid to face dad, so they went to mom, who took them to dad. When facing dad with mom, the encounter was no longer overwhelming, and reconciliation always followed.



We can see how Our Lady miraculously assisted even the recalcitrant, hostile Alphonse Ratisbonne, who no doubt struggled with each of the three elements we just discussed. In a single moment, he was convinced that he needed conversion, that it was possible, and that Our Lord would offer all he needed through the Sacraments and accompany him for the rest of his life.

We might become disheartened when we look at all the sin in the world, and the number of persons in society who seem indifferent to evil, and the amount of pride there seems to be in living a sinful life. Not only is there no shame, we can see a boastful façade from those who openly commit evil acts. You may have encountered the attitude: I judge you; don't you dare judge me, and we'll get along just fine. What are we to do? How are we to maintain hope? We pray and sacrifice. And we help individuals. The world is converted through the conversion of individuals. I can remember several times when we were looking for a societal change through elections or the passing of laws. One election in particular, my students saw clearly what was on the line, and they asked me what they could do since they couldn't vote. I told them they could pray and make sacrifices. They started a movement. They spoke to their classmates, and many of them made significant sacrifices and made extra time to pray. They were dedicated. Mind you, I never promoted a particular candidate in the classroom; I merely answered a few students who shared concerns with me, and they took it from there.

The election turned out the exact opposite of what they were praying for, and they were so disappointed. They asked me what happened, "Sister, we PRAYED and SACRIFICED! For WEEKS! How could God still let this happen?" Fortunately, the Holy Spirit came to the rescue, because I was at a loss as to what to tell them that they would find helpful. I answered that elections reveal the hearts of the voters. A LOT of people voted as the students prayed, so not all is lost, but I wonder: if the students had felt that they "won" the election, would they have ceased their efforts of prayer and sacrifice, assuming that the mission of conversion was fully accomplished? So we took the loss as a call to renew our efforts



in prayer and sacrifice, that their efforts are about something much bigger than a single election. I hope they never stop praying.

We must also remember that my continual conversion is an essential element in the conversion of the world. When Fr. Masmitjá founded our Community for the conversion of sinners, he did not focus primarily on the conversion of others, though that is the apostolic mission of the Sisters. The Constitutions are full of exhortations and practices aimed at assisting the Sisters to live a life of continual conversion, to have a heart ever more like Our Lady's, because such a heart brings fulness of life to the Sister and is more efficacious in the apostolate. In the evening, as I examine my day, I look at the feelings, movements and decisions of my soul throughout the day, and where my heart was aligned with the Heart of Our Lady, and where I had a feeling or attitude that was un-Marian. That tells me where I am still in need of conversion, and I can with joy and confidence turn to Our Lady begging her to help me have a heart that is more like hers. I can only imagine how delighted she is to fulfill that request. I invite you to pray the same, beginning tonight.

I would like to end with a passage from St. Augustine, which I find to be Marian and motivating in this endeavor of working and praying for the conversion of sinners:

The straying sheep you have not recalled; the lost sheep you have not sought. In one way or another, we go on living between the hands of robbers and the teeth of raging wolves, and in light of these present dangers we ask your prayers. The sheep moreover are insolent. The shepherd seeks out the straying sheep, but because they have wandered away and are lost, they say that they are not ours. "Why do you want us? Why do you seek us?" they ask, as if their straying and being lost were not the very reason for our wanting them and seeking them out. "If I am straying," he says, "if I am lost, why do you want me?" You are straying, that is why I wish to recall you. You have been lost; I wish to find you. "But I wish to stray," he says: "I wish to be lost."



So you wish to stray and be lost? How much better that I do not also wish this.

Certainly, I dare say, I am unwelcome. But I listen to the Apostle who says: Preach the word; insist upon it, welcome and unwelcome. Welcome to whom? Unwelcome to whom?

By all means welcome to those who desire it; unwelcome to those who do not. However unwelcome, I dare to say: “You wish to stray, you wish to be lost; but I do not want this.” For the one whom I fear does not wish this. And should I wish it, consider his words of reproach: The straying sheep you have not recalled; the lost sheep you have not sought. Shall I fear you rather than him? Remember, we must all present ourselves before the judgement seat of Christ.

I shall recall the straying; I shall seek the lost. Whether they wish it or not, I shall do it. And should the brambles of the forests tear at me when I seek them, I shall force myself through all straits; I shall put down all hedges. So far as the God whom I fear grants me the strength, I shall search everywhere. I shall recall the straying; I shall seek after those on the verge of being lost. If you do not want me to suffer, do not stray, do not become lost. It is enough that I lament your straying and loss. No, I fear that in neglecting you, I shall also kill what is strong. Consider the passage that follows: And what was strong you have destroyed. Should I neglect the straying and lost, the strong one will also take delight in straying and in being lost.

Let’s end with the Memorare, for our own conversion and the conversion of sinners:

Remember, O most gracious Virgin Mary, that never was it known that anyone who fled to thy protection, implored thy help or sought thy intercession was left unaided. Inspired by this confidence, I fly unto thee, O Virgin of virgins, my Mother. To thee do I come, before thee I stand, sinful and sorrowful. O Mother of the Word Incarnate, despise not my petitions, but in thy mercy hear and answer me. Amen.

Immaculate Heart of Mary, pray for us.