



The Immaculate Heart of Mary



The Heart

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Mary's Heart and Ours

Jesus teaches, “You shall love the LORD, your God, with your whole heart” (cf. Matt. 22:37). In the Hebrew Scriptures the word “heart” is the most common term used for the deepest reality of a person (Kubicki, 7). The heart is a symbol of the core of one’s being (Dictionary, 228). Today we will consider the human heart: Mary’s heart and ours, especially as revealed in Scripture. We will look at three concepts regarding the heart: identity, formation, and fruit—first, identity: the heart represents the whole person; second, formation: what comes into the heart; third, fruit: what comes out of the heart.

Looking first at identity, let us consider the Hearts of Jesus and Mary. Jesus has a Sacred Heart; sacred means “holy”. Jesus is an infinite divine Person; He is God the Son, eternally begotten of the Father. Jesus receives all He is and has from the God the Father, and returns all He is and has to God the Father. There is an ongoing total self-gift in the Blessed Trinity, a perpetual giving and receiving in love. Then there is Mary: Mary has an Immaculate Heart; immaculate means “without stain,” “free of sin.” Mary is a finite, perfect human person. She receives all she is and has from God, and returns all she is and has to God. Her freedom from sin means there are no obstacles to her total receptivity and self-gift in love to God.

Scripture reveals a great deal about Mary’s heart and identity in the Annunciation account alone (cf. Luke 1:26–38). She is described as “a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph”; God reveals to Mary that she is “full of grace”; in fact, the angel calls her by this title rather than by her proper name. He reveals that she will bear Jesus, the Son of the Most High, who will reign as King forever. Mary responds, “I am the handmaid of the Lord.” All of these descriptions are complementary: Mary is simultaneously “full of grace,” “virgin, bride, and mother,” “servant and queen.” The graces in Mary’s heart are gifts of God nurtured by Mary’s response.



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The Immaculate and Sorrowful Heart of Mary combines several symbols that reveal her identity and mission. The heart symbolizes her whole being, the flame her charity, the roses her virtue, the sword her sorrows. These give us a glimpse of Mary's vocation and character—yet there is much more depth and richness beyond what meets the eye. Observing her in Scripture and praying in her company can deepen our appreciation of Our Lady. Even so, there are depths of beauty and grace in Mary's heart that are known and understood by God alone.

Like Mary, we receive our identity from God. It is at the heart of our identity to receive who we are and give who we are totally in love. We do not have sacred or immaculate hearts, so this totality is not always easy. Even so, it is part of our identity as creatures made in God's image: God designed our hearts to be receptive and responsive in love. The Catechism expounds upon the heart beautifully as follows: "The heart is the dwelling-place where I am, where I live; according to the Semitic or Biblical expression, the heart is the place 'to which I withdraw.' The heart is our hidden center, beyond the grasp of our reason and of others; only the Spirit of God can fathom the human heart and know it fully. The heart is the place of decision, deeper than our psychic drives. It is the place of truth, where we choose life or death. It is the place of encounter, because as image of God we live in relation: it is the place of covenant" (CCC n. 2563).

We have considered the heart as representing the whole person, the identity; let us now consider the formation of the heart, what comes into the heart. There is a reciprocal relationship between the heart's character and the heart's content. The quality of the heart affects what is allowed to come in... and what is allowed to come in affects the quality of the heart. For example, someone who strives to think charitably of others will avoid gossip; this in turn safeguards the heart to continue thinking charitably of others. On the other hand, someone who thinks poorly of others may be more likely to listen to gossip about them; this drags the heart into continuing to think poorly of others.

What we allow into our hearts can pass through three stages: thinking, pondering, and treasuring. The heart is the place our thoughts reside; the heart is the place we ponder; the heart is the place where our treasure is. Thinking, pondering, and treasuring affect us to different degrees, and they form the disposition of our hearts.

The heart is where our thoughts enter and reside. Thoughts can come and go, and we have to decide whether or not to accept them. Mary is immaculate and full of grace, and meanwhile fully human. We can only imagine the thoughts that might have crossed her mind on various occasions: in the joyful moments of her life, in her times of trial and sorrow, in her daily interactions with imperfect people. Mary's immaculate heart and God's grace enabled her to think virtuously, and she will help us do the same if we ask her.

Saint Ignatius of Loyola teaches that we discern our thoughts in three steps: first, be aware; second, understand; third, act—accept the good, reject the bad (Gallagher, 17). Some thoughts are good and deserve to be accepted; they are healthy and nurture the love in our hearts. Some thoughts are bad and need to be rejected; they are toxic and damage the love in our hearts. Sometimes we deliberately call thoughts to mind, and other times thoughts take us by surprise. When bad thoughts come around, it can help to imagine a revolving door or a round-about at the entrance of the heart to send bad thoughts away. It is also advisable to have good thoughts ready to replace the bad!

Praying with Scripture can help us examine our thoughts and discern what is forming our hearts. The letter to the Hebrews says, “Indeed, the word of God is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating even between soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and able to discern reflections and thoughts of the heart” (Heb. 4:12). Jesus knows the thoughts of our hearts. Scripture reveals repeatedly that Jesus knew the thoughts of both his followers and those who opposed Him, such as the time He forgave a paralyzed man: “Jesus immediately knew in his mind what they were thinking to themselves, so he said, ‘Why are you thinking such things in your hearts?’” (Luke 2:1-12)

Whether our thoughts are good or bad, we can turn to Jesus in trust because He loves us, and He sees everything anyway. When my little sister was about three years old, she played a funny version of hide-and-seek. As my parents and I sat in the living room, she would walk in with a blanket over her head; she couldn’t see us, so she thought we couldn’t see her either. If we think we can hide our hearts from Jesus, we are like my little sister with the blanket on her head—except Jesus can also see right through the blanket. “The Lord looks into the heart,” and we might as well be transparent with Him about everything. He wants what is good for us, and He wants us to trust Him, willingly revealing the thoughts in our hearts.

Thoughts are formative to some degree, and pondering is even more formative. Saint Paul encourages wholesome thoughts that lead to pondering: he advises, “Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. [...] Then the God of peace will be with you” (Philippians 4:8, 9b). Thinking turns into pondering when we keep reflecting on something. Mary did this after Jesus’ birth and the visit of the shepherds: “Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart” (cf. Luke 2: 19). What did she ponder? Perhaps she marveled at Jesus’ identity as Son of God and heir to the throne of King David as she saw him lying in the manger. Perhaps she wondered about the angels’ messages: to her in Nazareth, to Joseph in a dream, to the shepherds in the field.

Mary knows the value of pondering Jesus' life and the formative effect this pondering can have in our hearts. In Fatima Mary called upon us to pray the rosary daily, inviting us to ponder the life of Jesus with her. Saint John Paul the Great makes an observation in his apostolic letter on the rosary: he writes, "The memories of Jesus, impressed upon Mary's heart, were always with her, leading her to reflect on the various moments of her life at her Son's side. [...] In the recitation of the Rosary, the Christian community enters into contact with the memories and the contemplative gaze of Mary" (*Rosarium Virginis Mariae*, n. 11).

There are various methods of pondering and praying with Mary. Reflecting on the rosary, Saint John Paul points out, "The center of gravity in the Hail Mary, the hinge as it were which joins its two parts, is the name of Jesus. [...] Pope Paul VI drew attention [...] to the custom [...] of highlighting the name of Christ by the addition of a clause referring to the mystery being contemplated" (*ibid.*, n. 33). For example, when pondering the Annunciation we might pray, "Blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus, Son of the Most High." Another idea for praying the rosary or reading Scripture is to watch and listen for virtue in the heart of Jesus, Mary, or those they encounter. We might also ask: How would my heart respond if I were in the scene?

The heart of Mary pondered the events of Jesus' life, even when she did not fully understand something. Perhaps Mary pondered in order to understand or to appreciate. Perhaps she pondered in order to be thankful. Perhaps she pondered in order to observe God's grace at work. Mary is an ideal companion when we ponder God's love, God's will, and his mysterious work in our own hearts.

Setting aside time to pray helps us ponder the will of God in our lives like Mary did. What we ponder repeatedly will often shape the way we see things. For example, if we ponder God's goodness to us, we may find our hearts responding more readily with gratitude. Our pondering can form a mentality of looking at the world through a particular lens: looking at others with love, compassion, understanding, the desire to help; or on the negative side, looking with envy or bitterness. What we ponder in our hearts can form our entire worldview, how we see everything. The book "From Christendom to Apostolic Mission" describes a "sacramental worldview" (Shea, 68). When we ponder God's presence everywhere, his constant giving to us and our receiving and giving in response, we can see the world through a sacramental lens. Every moment, circumstance, and person provide an opportunity to encounter God. Certainly, Mary's pondering enabled her to live in God's presence constantly.

Our hearts are formed by our thoughts and our pondering, and especially by what we treasure. To treasure something is to hold it dear. How do we know what we treasure? Here are some questions for consideration: What captivates and holds your attention? Where do your thoughts turn spontaneously? What do you

value? What makes you vigilant and eager? What motivates you? Jesus says, “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matthew 6:21). What we treasure reveals our deeper desires. What did Mary’s Immaculate Heart most likely treasure? Scripture suggests that she continuously pondered and treasured the Word of God, the life of Jesus, God’s law, and opportunities for charity toward others.

We have looked at the heart and our identity, we have looked at the formation of the heart through what comes in: our thoughts, pondering, and treasure; now let us look at the fruit, what comes out of the heart.

The heart is the place where we make decisions, the place from which we act and speak. Our daily decisions flow from our thoughts, ponderings, and desires—our treasure. Repeated small decisions develop patterns that prepare for bigger, weightier decisions. Jesus teaches something related in the Gospel: “The person who is trustworthy in very small matters is also trustworthy in great ones; and the person who is dishonest in very small matters is also dishonest in great ones” (Luke 16:10). The little things do matter.

Consider Mary’s “fiat” at the Annunciation—a tremendous decision. Even her Immaculate Heart could not fathom the depth and magnitude of this announcement, the mystery of the Incarnation. Mary’s prompt decision to receive God’s proposal and give her consent indicates many previous decisions: these formed her habitual disposition of availability to God.

The Bible records other examples in Jesus’ family, such as King David, who was “a man after [God’s] own heart” (cf. 1 Sam. 13:14). David repeatedly trusted in the LORD, obeyed the LORD, prayed to the LORD, and led God’s people with integrity. His little daily decisions developed the habit of fidelity to God. Awhile into his reign, David committed two grievous sins: adultery and murder. These were not characteristic of David. Although David did give in to temptation on this occasion, he deeply regretted his sins and repented wholeheartedly. His psalm of contrition is very well known: “A clean heart create for me, O God; renew within me a steadfast spirit” (cf. Psalm 51:12). David persevered in goodness overall by repeatedly deciding to be faithful to God.

King Solomon, son of King David, made different decisions at different points in his lifetime. In his youth, as a new king, Solomon asked the Lord for the gift of wisdom—a listening heart. He asked that he be able to distinguish between good and evil, in order to fulfill his vocation and govern God’s people. Over the years, however, Solomon gradually married many foreign wives; he ignored the Lord’s warning that these wives would draw Solomon’s heart to their foreign idols. Scripture recounts, “When Solomon was old his wives had turned his heart to follow other gods, and his heart was not entirely with the LORD, his God, as the

heart of his father David had been. [...] So the LORD said to Solomon: Since this is what you want, and you have not kept my covenant [...], I will surely tear the kingdom away from you” (cf. 1 Kings 11:4, 11). This sobering account illustrates that our decisions matter: will we allow our hearts to be divided, or will we give our whole-hearted allegiance to our Lord?

Decisions come out of the heart, and so do words. Jesus says in the Gospel, “From the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks” (Luke 6:45b). What must be in the heart of Mary to produce her song, the Magnificat? When Elizabeth praised Mary for her faith, Mary responded by praising God, his goodness to her, and his faithfulness in every generation. Mary’s Magnificat is a tapestry of quotations and images from the Jewish Scriptures, our Old Testament. Mary’s heart, full of the word of God, overflows in singing his praises.

The litany of the Immaculate Heart of Mary addresses her as “full of grace”, and her heart overflows in her intercession for us. The litany of the Sacred Heart of Jesus addresses Him as “full of goodness and love”, and his Heart overflows to give us life. Psalm 45 begins with the verse, “My heart overflows with noble words; to the king I must speak the song I have made...” (Psalm 45:2a). On the other hand, Psalm 73 speaks of some people far from the Lord: “Evil thoughts flood their hearts; they scoff and speak with malice” (Ps. 73:7b-8a). Today is not so different from biblical times. Our world needs more people whose hearts are full of goodness and virtue, whose words will lift up and edify.

What fills your heart? One analogy is to imagine a cup with no lid, filled to the brim with liquid. If you carry this cup and someone bumps into you, the contents will splash out at least a little bit—water, coffee, soda, juice, whatever is inside. Now imagine your heart as a cup filled to the brim. If someone bumps into you, catches you off guard, what will spill out? In prayer, why not ask Jesus to help us discover what fills our hearts?

“From the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks”—and likewise, from the fullness of the heart the person acts. Mary’s heart is full of love for God and neighbor. From a full heart Mary went in haste to visit and assist her aged and pregnant cousin Elizabeth. From a full heart Mary interceded with Jesus for the newlyweds at Cana to spare them embarrassment. From a full heart Mary stood beside Jesus’ cross despite the cruel words and behavior of soldiers and opponents of Jesus. Our Lady can help our hearts grow virtue so that our actions will spontaneously flow from hearts full of love for God and neighbor.

Oh, the human heart—what a rich symbol of our identity, formable and fruitful! Let us ask Our Lady’s intercession that our hearts will resemble hers. Saint Louis de Montfort offers the image of praying “in” Mary: he says, “She will be, as it were, the oratory of our soul, in which we offer up all our prayers to God”

(DeMontfort, n. 47). I invite you to imagine praying within Mary's Immaculate Heart: imagine her heart as beautiful basilica—a spacious, grace-filled, living basilica which itself is praying.

Let us pray with Mary: Lord, help our hearts receive and give everything with love for You; help our thoughts, ponderings, and treasure form our hearts in holiness; help us bear good fruit in our decisions, words, and actions. Immaculate Heart of Mary, pray for us. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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