

Encouragement Encouragement

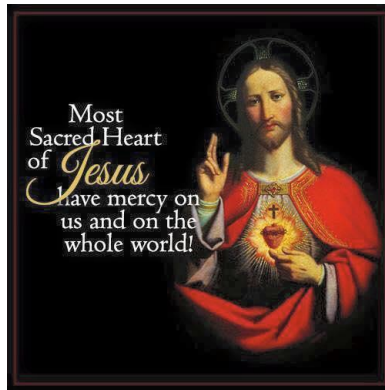
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Prayer and Pandemic... A Lenten Path

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In a matter of weeks, on February 17th, Ash Wednesday, we enter the season of Lent. Once again Lent will probably be during a 'lockdown' and there will be the usual restriction for so many people. There is much suffering and hardship for many, at different levels and virtually no one can say that they have not been affected in some way. We know that Pandemic is 'world-wide' and each country has had to deal with it in a variety of ways. We also know that hunger and extreme poverty has made the situation even harder in some places. As Lent approaches our thoughts turn to how we can best utilise this period that beckons us to have a change of heart, 'metanoia' and repent of the ways that we have not perhaps fully responded to God's will for us or obligations to our neighbour. We are called to love God and our love our neighbour.



Perhaps you are thinking that there is enough suffering at present without having to either fast or pray any more, or make sacrifices, though we should pray in good times or bad and at all times thank God for His love and mercy. Perhaps another period of austerity for whatever reason fills you with dread and fear. You may even be thinking that giving up things for Lent seems pointless at this time. Of course, we can never give up being charitable and helpful to all people and that is a positive thing to do this Lent. Yet prayer is the most important **action** that we can all take at this time. Wherever we have to pray or can, in churches or at home, our work as Christians should focus on this activity. Many people say that they are finding it difficult to pray. This is understandable as so many certainties have been eroded but surely this is a time when our faith is put into practice.

We have a God of Love and Mercy who is interested in our every day. We have also a God of justice

who asks of us to follow Him relentlessly for the common Good and for the salvation of souls. Has He not got the right to correct His Children and as always bring them back to His tender love and care? Two devotions that have inspired many countless souls have been the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus as revealed to St. Margaret Mary Alacoque and The Divine Mercy as given to St. Faustyna Kowalska. It troubles me somewhat, that many seem to see these in opposition. Both have been revealed at different times in the church historically and both have deep roots in Scripture. Compassion and Tenderness are surely at the core of the message of Jesus and did He not say that 'I am humble and tender of heart' (Matt 11: 29) and again 'come to Me all who are burdened and I will give you rest'. We have to look no further than the Beatitudes to see the reference to Mercy... 'Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain Mercy'. (Matthew 5:7)

Through the two Saints, each given a special task we have been encouraged to see the many aspects of our God. As Jesus told St. Faustyna as people no longer understand the meaning of Love then they should experience my Mercy. Sometimes these two devotions are referred to in a way that almost appears that we are talking of 'different people' instead of images of the same multi-aspected God. But as we enter into Lent let us ponder how we can rely on *both* and that in this time in our history and in this season, we have a very special 'act' to perform and that is to be rooted in prayer and be intercessors, especially for a broken world, that perhaps knows nothing of either attributes or of God himself.

Two hundred years ago, in 1720 a ship docked in the city of Marseille in France. Some illegal passengers were allowed to disembark and with them came the bacillus plague. The plague spread rapidly and

"Have courage, trust in God, St Joseph and the Blessed Mother and you need have no fear." St Mary Mackillop

added to the poverty and inequalities of the city leading to great suffering. Historically it is known as 'The Great Plague of Marseille'. For two years the plague ravaged the city and between 90,000 and 120,000 people died. In a city of 400,000. A city once known for its vigilance and quarantine rules in spite of being a bustling port and being susceptible to outbreaks of disease could not contain the plague. This was also time of a heresy - 'Jansenism' - that prevented people from trusting God and believing in His love, but rather only His punishment. As the epidemic grew there seem to be little hope of containment. Heaven seems to have given warnings which were not heeded at the time. Soon the dilapidated hospitals and the doctors were overwhelmed, and people were dying in the streets. Many clergy died ministering to the sick and the Bishop Henri de Belsunce himself wrote to a fellow Bishop, *"By the grace of God, I am still standing among the dead and dying. Everything around me had been brought down and I have only one chaplain left"*. But the Bishop assumed the role of the Good Shepherd and did not leave his flock. In the end he was forced to close the churches as the bodies were piled up inside and out, so he continued to pray and preach 'outside' and to minister to his people.



Two visions had warned the people of the impending tragedy - to the Friars Minor and people during the Eucharist and the other to Sister Anne-Marie Madeleine Rémuzat who received a message calling for conversion. This was communicated to the Bishop via her spiritual director. The Bishop acted with speed and begged the people for more prayer, and public Masses were held and devotion started to spread about the Love of The Heart of Jesus for His people. Sister Anne-Marie pleaded for what the city had to do and was told that Heaven wanted a Feast which honoured the Sacred Heart and that if this was done then the plague would diminish. The Bishop responded and a feast was declared on the 1st of November and the city was consecrated to The Sacred heart of Jesus.

Many helpers were healed from the disease spontaneously. The plague diminished and ceased completely. On the 15th June, Mass in honour of the Sacred Heart was celebrated for the first time.. But as often happens people then returned to their usual ways and devotion diminished. There was much cynicism among the notaries and establishment and those who failed to participate in the prayer. In May 1722 the epidemic reignited. The Bishop pleaded with the municipal authorities to pray with the people... *'God does not ask for our gifts but our hearts,'* he said. The municipal leaders agreed in desperation and a procession of rededication was made with the 'coat of arms' of the City held high in this consecration. This event is continued today in a candlelit procession. Of course the plague ceased. Medals of the Sacred Heart were made and issued in thousands*. The magistrate, Sister Anne-Marie's uncle, made the vow in perpetuity. There are many twists and turns to this wonderful story but I think the implications are clear for us.

Maybe this Lent we should pray with our whole heart to a God of Mercy and Love to spare us from the pandemic and subsequent strains, similar or different. We must pray for those whose task it is to encourage this but also for the wonderful people who have worked to heal and sustain others. But let us place ourselves in the Heart of God this Lent, not as a penance, in grace, with trust and in intercession.

Halina Holman

Pope Francis

"Consistent prayer produces progressive transformation, makes us strong in times of tribulation, gives us the grace to be supported by Him who loves us and always protects us."

Rome, Nov. 2020

Prayer

Heart of Jesus, abyss of love and mercy, I place all my trust in you and hope for everything from your goodness.*

Ven. Sr. Anne Marie Rémuzat

Feast Days in February

2nd *The Presentation of the Lord*

3rd St. Blaise

5th St. Agatha

6th St. Paul Miki & Companions

7th **Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

8th Ss. Josephine Bakita & Jerome Emiliani

10th St. Scholastica

11th **Our Lady of Lourdes**

14th **Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

17th **Ash Wednesday**

21st **First Sunday of Lent**

22nd The Chair of St. Peter

23rd St. Polycarp

28th **Second Sunday of Lent**