

October 16: Popular Piety Serving Mission

Today the Church recalls the life and contribution of Saint Margaret Mary Alacoque (1647-1690), a French Visitation nun, who received visions of the Sacred Heart and popularized the devotion, guided by her spiritual director, Saint Claude Colombiere. Many Catholics are familiar with the “First Friday” tradition of receiving the Eucharist for nine consecutive months. Margaret Mary asserted that those keeping the First Fridays would not die in sin or without the sacraments; Christ the Sacred Heart would be their refuge at the hour of death.

How can such valid popular piety serve mission? How could a devotion, which sometimes may be limited to a personal, private practice, become more relevant today? Recall the original symbol manifested to Margaret Mary: *a heart afire with love for humanity that was surmounted by a cross*. This symbol clearly implies that devotion to the Sacred Heart is intimately connected with the paschal mystery: the mystery of Jesus’ dying and rising again. In a word, it means that the Sacred Heart calls Christians to mission and a self-sacrificing love for one’s neighbor, a committed love ready to face the challenges of genuine fraternal social service.

Our hearts must be transformed into loving replicas of the Heart of Jesus, who reached out to the lost, lonely, little, least, and last in society. Thus, in contemporary situations, devotees of the Sacred Heart are called upon to concretize their love in face of challenging social realities. Today the Church sees that serving the poor and the disadvantaged involves intelligent effort to change unjust structures in society. Linking the Sacred Heart devotion with growth in heartfelt compassion for the needy would contribute significantly to the renewal of this traditional popular devotion, making it more responsive to contemporary social realities and the need, as Pope Francis notes, to become “a Church which is poor and for the poor” (*Evangelii Gaudium* 198).