

Twenty Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time
October 21, 2018
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Reflection

Yesterday the Catholic Church of Canada celebrated the optional memorial of St. Margaret Mary Alacoque. She began the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Soon after entering her convent in France, she wanted to know how to meditate. Her novice mistress told her, "Go, and place yourself before God like a blank canvas." She knelt before the Blessed Sacrament and received her answer. "My sovereign Master showed me that my soul was the blank canvas on which he wished to paint all the details of his life of suffering, entirely spent in love and poverty, solitude, silence and sacrifice. After emptying my heart and stripping my soul naked, he kindled in them so burning a desire to love and suffer that it allowed me no rest."

In today's Gospel, Jesus says "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Here Jesus identifies himself as the Suffering Servant foretold in Scripture. Isaiah speaks about him. "It was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain." His death was planned, but his killers were not passive pawns moved by the hand of God. We're all blinded by the consequences of original sin, but we retain free will. The plan of salvation includes our free responses, and God permits them to accomplish his plan. This plan of salvation is like an escape plan. Families have an escape plan. We think ahead about what to do in case there's a fire.

Isa 53:10-11
Ps 33
Heb 4:14-16
Mk 10:35-45

If the air is full of smoke, cover up with a blanket and leave on your hands and knees. If the front door is blocked, go out the back. If the door knob is hot, go out the window. (Easier said than done). But God has an escape plan that is intended for all of us. We need it to avoid the death owing to sin. The plan of salvation, our escape into eternal life, was accomplished by Jesus on the Cross. He died so that we could live. "The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities."

But his suffering wasn't limited to the Cross. It encompassed his whole life. As St. Margaret Mary says, it was "entirely spent in love and poverty, solitude, silence and sacrifice." "Love and poverty, solitude, silence and sacrifice." We know about the love of the Holy Family, the love he had for his disciples. We remember his poverty, working as a carpenter and then walking through Galilee with no place to lay his head (Mt 8:20). The Eucharist makes present his sacrifice: the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. But St. Margaret Mary mentions a couple other things too: solitude and silence. These might surprise us. His miraculous signs began early in his public ministry. He started by turning water into wine at Cana. Then he cured the sick, the blind, the lame. Word spread and he attracted great crowds, clamoring and pushing. Where is the solitude? When did he hear silence?

Think back to his baptism. Afterwards he left the Jordan River for the wilderness. Forty days of fasting alone; a day for each year between Egypt and the promised land. Here was solitude. Uniting himself to the followers of Moses, escaping and freed, hearing only the dry sighs of the desert wind whispering their complaints and promises, their doubts and their hopes. Here was silence. Jesus heard no other voices until the devil offered three temptations: bread, fame and power. True God and true man, he was tempted but victorious. "We have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin." No created power would win our salvation. It was left to the suffering of God made man.

Forty days is a long time. In a couple weeks, I'll face twenty days of army training...and let's just say that I will rely on your prayers. But St. Margaret Mary speaks of Jesus having an entire life of solitude and silence. Maybe this is why. In taking on flesh, he entered into time. In a mysterious way, I suggest that he was isolated from the eternal and perfect dance of the Trinity. He was left reaching, longing, praying, imitating, following; not yet resurrected to glory, not yet ascended to heaven. Even at the age of twelve he said, "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" Sure he suffered: he could get hungry, thirsty, tired. He bled, and St. Margaret Mary started a devotion to his pierced and sacred heart. But he could only love God one moment at a time. He could only give his love to one neighbour at a time. This was solitude. This was silence.

For us, our lack of union with God can last for days if not years, so we become indifferent. For him, the limitation of the flesh was an agony. But not without hope. "Truly the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love, to deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine." His faith sustained him in hope; it let him love us to the end. His suffering paid our debt and opened the gates to heaven. We disciples follow his example: enduring solitude within a culture that is drifting from the Church; feeling the silence of dryness when we try to pray; persevering through grace for something that is better than ourselves - trusting that he will lift us up. "Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all."