

THE SOURCE OF JOY... IS THE HEART OF CHRIST

SAINT MARGARET MARY

Prophet and pioneer,
Witness of a fire which burns and enlightens

Pastoral Letter of Bishop Benoît Rivière
on the occasion of the 2020 centenary
of the canonization of Saint Margaret Mary

Diocese of Autun

Introduction

I wish to address myself above all to the pilgrims and to the members of the diocese of Autun who will be celebrating the jubilee of the canonization of Saint Margaret Mary.

In listening to certain persons who know much better than I the personality and mission of this saint from Burgundy of the seventeenth century, a Visitandine of Paray-le-Monial, and in reading some pages written about her, notably the enlightening reflections of Father Édouard GLOTIN in his book, *The Bible of the Heart of Jesus*, I have written this pastoral letter.

May the élan of the Virgin Mary visiting the house where tears were changed into happiness at the conception of John the Baptist, lead us, like Saint Margaret Mary, into true joy!

A prophetess

True friends of Christ are "guides" to sanctity. Far from discouraging us on the very trying path of human existence, they are for us like genuine big brothers and sisters giving confidence to the younger. They are better than "coaches" for us, they are lovers of our happiness, they are witnesses standing beside us, they are comforting hearth places

who attract us toward the true light. They are prophets of our authentic vocation. And in contact with them, we are happily pushed off the beaten path and interiorly "impelled" to change deeply so as to become, as the gospel says, men and women who have the soul of a child.

When the Church gives them to us as exemplars, we can lean on them in all simplicity, we can glide behind their footsteps, unite ourselves to their voice, flow into their prayer and their immense confidence in God. In short, in approaching a little more closely to their humanity inundated with grace, we find true gusto for living and the taste for loving.

This is what I wish us to find in getting a little closer to a true friend of Christ, Margaret ALACOQUE, who chose to add the name of Mary to her baptismal name on the day of her confirmation, when she was an adult.

To draw close to someone, someone alive and therefore individual, unique - already means taking off our heavy shoes, our glasses with filtered lens: it means to forbid ourselves to apply analytical grids to a context which is outside the one we are familiar with. It means to welcome the strangeness, the difference, the surprising ... In short, we need humility to stay aware that our knowledge is always limited. That is particularly true when it is a question of knowledge of a woman, an authentic mystic, who lived in the world of the seventeenth century.

To draw close to Saint Margaret Mary means accepting, first and foremost, to be disoriented, and perhaps even "disturbed". Her hidden life in a monastery and, at the same time, the communication, under obedience, of what was given to her by God for the world - is that not the feat of an "adventuress" about whom, from the bottom of our heart, we have a few doubts in following? In reality, when we begin, even slightly, to perceive that she is very different from the storybook pictures which we might think of, then our hesitations and our fears vanish. And this woman canonized by Benedict XV almost 100 years ago can become our big sister - or very simply, our sister.

What we call her religious "vocation", her calling to consecrated life, had to wait some years, not in order to resonate to the depths of her Burgundian heart of Vérosvres, but in order to be able to be expressed, to be related to others. Margaret Mary could only speak

about it at the age of 20, and what's more, it would take four more years for her to discern the place to live that was entirely given to this calling. This teaches us that for things that concern our lifelong commitment, maturations are indispensable and necessary. The "prophet" is not someone who rushes headlong into a wall! He is not some unstable character who runs after the first idea that comes along, and then tomorrow there will be another... Why are you going here? Why are you choosing such-and-such a place to live? Margaret Mary says: "*I only want to be a religious for the love of God!*" She perceived at certain moments a sort of interior "confirmation", as when she crossed the threshold of the monastery doorway of the Visitation where she had maturely chosen to go in order to enter there until death: "*It is here that I want you*", she heard in her heart.

This can be verified for us, whoever we may be, when we search diligently to make changes in our life, to reject the bad entirely, and to listen to the voice of the Lord. Yes, then, we will receive some sure "indications" on the part of God. He makes us see what the right path is. He gives us some assurance when we have taken the means of discernment and have committed our will: "I will follow you, Lord, show me the way!"

When God comes to look for someone in order to introduce him into the sweet realities of his covenant, he suppresses nothing of his humanity. He does not change our flesh into "angelic" flesh! It is on human fabric (which He knows better than anyone!) that He invents and paints the beauty of the saints. Now, the nature of Margaret Mary, this daughter of Verosvres, is not of the genre of battle-ready chevaliers! It is not the nature of a commanding general! Margaret had a nature that was undeniably refined and very delicate. She saw the light of day on the 22nd of July, 1647, in the era when Saint Francis de Sales, the founder of the Visitation with Jane de Chantal (herself deceased less than ten years before), was just being canonized. She belonged to a family of importance, who quickly knew, after the death of the father, a period of harsh trials. We may remember: there was the separation from her godmother; there was the illness that left Margaret Mary bedridden for nearly four long years, at the age when everyone else (she was 10) wants to romp about freely; there was next the illness of her own mother that everyone judged to be incurable, and which obliged the adolescent to make herself a nurse and wash her own mother's sores for several years; there was the incapacity of her relatives

and even of her pastor to understand the authenticity of her vocation; there was next incomprehension when she chose a monastery where her family knew no one.

In this slow and progressive blossoming of an adult freedom, and with a confidence which allowed it to be decided without constraint, Margaret Mary discovered this golden thread of her life opened up in the love of God and neighbor: suffering can teach us patience, love impels us toward a joyful generosity at every moment, and love is also the victor over certain of our fears.

A courageous and patient pioneer

This young woman of Verosvres who became a Visitandine of Paray-le-Monial, would have had reasons to abdicate in her search for God, so often was she subject to pressures and trials. Her perseverance in the faith, her manner of always wanting to love and to be obedient to whatever was asked of her, came from the interior strength she received in the midst of interior and exterior trials.

Strength was required to overcome the pressures from her family and those around her who wanted her to marry! She had to struggle with herself in order not to be overwhelmed by the guilt that everyone was to make her feel, if she were to leave her family and especially her mother! We could say what courage it took for her to overcome her natural aversion in caring for her mother! And then, it demanded courage to keep her interior liberty during the years of her adolescence during the course of which (after the death of her father) her mother, her brothers and herself were made a joke of (to put it mildly) by some aunts ruling over the household as true tyrants; and we dare (with some difficulty) to repeat, what she heard then in her conscience that was so pure, and which was able to name these personal enemies as "true friends of her soul"! And once her family members understood that she was going to guard her freedom and would go where God was leading her, they tried to at least persuade her to enter the Poor Clares where there were already family acquaintances. And yet no! There again, Margaret Mary, though tender and delicate, goes to enter the monastery of the Visitation where she knew no one, just to be absolutely certain of truly looking for God there.

As a Visitandine told me, Margaret Mary merited being called the patron saint of adolescents confronted with the misunderstanding of adults who ought to be their support. Yes, Margaret Mary went through, like many young people today, crises of anorexia, painful isolation, excessive and scrupulous introspection. And she learned not to depend solely on her own strength, and upon others, she learned to depend upon the strength of God who gives endurance, who causes us to get through trials, who urges us to love and to hope even when all seems to be going against us!

Saint Margaret Mary was a "normal" woman, a human being, with weaknesses that she knew how to accept and to integrate into her life, as much as into her dialogue with the Lord as in her daily relationships with those who were at her side. Her refined feminine sensitivity made her find expressions of tenderness and authentic love toward the one who had so often shown her his own, "the Christ who loved me and delivered himself up for me" as the apostle Paul said. In truth, Christ did not only show her the depths of his wounded heart, He united Margaret Mary's heart to his heart of universal charity. A liturgical prayer expresses it thus: "may our thoughts become your thoughts, Lord, and we will have for our brothers and for you, one same love".

Let us come then to the prayer life of Margaret Mary. It is the lifeblood which irrigates her entire body and soul. It is the breath of her liberty of spirit. To pray is truly a prophetic act in a world entirely tempted by its preoccupation with self. To pray means to be lights of the world; it is to be lovers and prophets of our earth. Without prayer, our interior and exterior earth dries up. Prayer means to love what one hopes for; and it is already, in a certain way, to taste the realities that will become true realities in the future.

Margaret Mary, as we have said, allowed herself to be formed with simplicity in prayer, and she was told by the one responsible for her formation that we should keep ourselves in prayer, particularly in Eucharistic adoration, somewhat like a canvas awaiting the hand of the painter.

We ought to remember that this life of prayer was intense, prolonged, ardent - even from her early childhood - and that Margaret Mary did not enter the monastery until she was 24. Not having known any spiritual direction before her entrance into the school of Saint Francis de Sales in the monastery of the Visitation, she had first advanced upon the path

of prayer truly alone. Later on, she was able to attest to the manner God himself made her enter into contemplation of the mysteries of His Son: "He presented himself to me in the mystery that he desired me to consider; and He rendered my spirit so strongly attentive by keeping my soul and all my powers immersed in himself that I did not feel any distractions, but my heart felt itself consumed by the desire to love him."

This is truly the character of the pioneer spirit - always forging ahead, on paths that one must clear because they are not cut out in advance. Margaret Mary has this spirit of entire confidence in God, a confidence next applied to the advice of a guide (we are thinking here certainly of Father Claude de la Colombiere) or of a superior. Far from restraining the generosity and energy of our baptized heart, the sincere dialogue with a brother or an elder sister qualified in spiritual direction makes us avoid the pitfalls of illusion and helps us to break through the roadblocks of scruples or of certain fears. "It is a matter of looking at one's misery within the great merciful love of the Sacred Heart of our Lord, " she once told a novice.

We can ask ourselves, at certain times: Truly, where is my heart? Where is the living center of my being? What is the "motor" of my thoughts and my actions? What is the profound motivation by which I live and breathe? What will dissipate my problems, what will free the joy and humility of Christ in my relationships with others? The fire which evidently consumes the heart of Saint Margaret Mary is waiting for us today. Margaret Mary has her center in "another". She impels us to love, to allow ourselves to touch the heart of the living Jesus, which is the heart of God in an entirely human heart. How beautiful is the life of Margaret Mary, always listening lovingly to God and about his benevolent project, always accepting that participation which God permits her to have in the mystery of the Cross.

Margaret Mary teaches us to leave our comfort zones and even our interior zones which are imbued with feelings of resentment. How attractive and encouraging is this active confidence of Margaret Mary, a confidence that is receptive and engaged, that she makes use of so admirably in the contemplation and adoration of the heart of Christ wounded and opened by love for the multitude. The more we advance, the more we suffer for not having loved enough. The less we love, explains Margaret Mary, the more we look at others with harshness, without mercy, suspecting of them even thoughts and actions that

they never had or committed. The more we allow ourselves to be touched by the love of God, the more we will sigh for not knowing how to love, and the more we will become honest with ourselves, and then the more we will envisage our neighbor with joy and tenderness, always in mercy.

Interior silence and love, patiently sought and maintained are part of the prophetic character of Margaret Mary for our era which is so noisy and so dispersed. The incessant "bombardment" of "news" of every kind, messages, e-mails ... render so much more pressing and salutary the invitation of Jesus to those who draw close to him: "enter into your innermost chamber, lock the door ... " Let us understand: do not allow any thought or feeling whatsoever to enter. "...and pray to your Father who is there in secret. " Beautiful silence is given to those whose actions want to please God more than men, and who are like a basket collecting what God wants to say and give. "Always, then, guard your interior in silence by speaking little to creatures, and much to God by your deeds, and suffering and acting out of love for him. Keep all your interior and exterior senses within the Sacred Heart of our Lord Jesus Christ: interior silence by the cutting short of all these useless thoughts and reflections of self love in order to dispose yourself to hearing the voice of the Spouse - exterior silence about all that could praise you - or to blame or accuse others - and this silence will be in order to honor the one of Jesus alone in the Blessed Sacrament - you will learn by this means to love in silence and to converse with his Sacred Heart."

The fire which burns and enlightens

When we speak of the holiness of men and women, it is always of a sanctity by participation in the unique sanctity of God. And I believe it to be useful to bring up here a possible ambiguity: holiness is not synonymous with virtue; the virtuous life is typically a sign of "sanctity", but not necessarily. There exist lives of holiness which are mixed with difficulties which are never surmounted here below. I remember this reflection of Cardinal COFFY, speaking to the Benedictine nuns of the "holiness" of the Virgin Mary. This reflection led to a question: what is the opposite of sin? It is not a virtue, but the recognition of one's sins and the acceptance of God's pardon, which means the

recognition that God alone is Holy and can sanctify me. The opposite of sin, is sanctity, holiness - which is a gift of God.

The saints are well and truly made of our human clay, truly the same clay as ours. Their life may appear to us as "strange" however, at certain moments, and we can feel ourselves far from them and their experiences. Why is that? It is because their life, entirely like our own, is called to let itself be converted by redemptive love that we can or cannot welcome, and there is where may be found the reason for this "strange" distance between the saints and ourselves at times! In effect, there exists a sadness, that of not being saints! Let us add that the secret of the transformation of our heart, that is, of our sanctification, escapes us, and only Faith makes us know and love God and our brothers with the selfsame love. Of ourselves, we cannot know the love with which God loves us. Saint Margaret Mary had the acute consciousness of her "nothingness" (if I dare speak of it), and she not only contemplated the mystery of the open heart of Christ outside of herself, she was united to it by grace and this was not stolen from her; better yet, she delivered herself up to this transforming union.

In the Gospel, we find a luminous word of the Lord which invites us to follow her lead, so important in order not to get lost in illusions: "Place yourselves," He says, "in my school, for I am meek and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls. " (Mt. 11 :29)

This phrase so deeply marked the founder of the Order of the Visitation, that he could write this to Jane de Chantal (and he added to it what people are not well enough aware of - long before, obviously, the coming into the world of Margaret Alacoque): *"In this way, the sisters will receive this privilege and this incomparable grace to carry the name of daughters of the Heart of Jesus."* Later, Margaret Mary will be nourished with the happiness of this profoundly evangelical teaching, the school of the gentleness and humility of the Savior. And since too often, alas, the evocation of the Sacred Heart brings to mind doleful and false images, let us again cite Saint Francis de Sales (Margaret Mary would surely be glad about this): *"the merit of the Cross is not in its weight, but in the manner in which it is carried."*

In a homily, the pope, John Paul II (himself so marked by the unimaginable violence of evil and by the salvific will that the Merciful Love of God opposes to the unleashing of inhumanity) said: "Saint Margaret Mary knew this admirable mystery, the overwhelming mystery of divine Love. Her entire life, hidden in Christ, was marked by the gift of this Heart which offered itself without limits to all human hearts. She was thoroughly seized by this divine mystery. All her life, Saint Margaret Mary burned with the living flame of this love which Christ came to illumine in the history of man."

These words of John Paul II on the subject of Saint Margaret Mary call to our attention to something about the universal character of this revelation of divine Love: it is a gift of the entire being of Christ, for the heart signifies the entire person; it is a gift without limits offered to all human hearts. And the human heart aspires to know pure love, and to be transformed.

Every man, every woman, every child, will find joy in contact with this heart which has so loved the world. All can allow themselves to be set afire by this fire of divine Love, that of Jesus alive, Jesus glorified.

Sainte Therese of Lisieux (who was not a "fan" of certain pictures of the Sacred Heart!) understood thoroughly this mystery, and she speaks of it with accents so comforting for the "fragile" beings, more or less "bruised", that we are. For example, she writes this to an ordinary priest: "Ah! my dear little Brother, since it has been given me to understand also the love of the Heart of Jesus, I swear to you that it has chased from my heart all fear. The memory of my faults humiliates me, brings me never to rely on my own strength which is only weakness, but more than this, this memory speaks to me of mercy and love. How, when one throws one's faults with an entirely filial confidence into the devouring furnace of Love, how would they not be consumed without return?"

Let us listen to Saint Margaret Mary tell us to flee discouragement: "We should never become discouraged if we allow ourselves to let go of anxiety - having recourse to the adorable heart of Jesus; and let us tell him: 'O my Savior, be my strength! Fight for me; I refuse not the battle, provided that you are my defense. O Lord, my heart is yours! You are the prize of my victories and the invincible support of my infirmity.' " She had this interior knowledge in which the heart of Christ had plunged her - as in a refuge, a port,

where the boats come to be sheltered. We think here of the admirable painting of the prodigal son rendered by Rembrandt, "the precipitation" of the rescued son into the merciful bosom of the Father. "It is necessary for us to withdraw ourselves into the wound of the Sacred Side, as a poor voyager who searches for a safe port in order to place himself in its shelter from the reefs and tempests of the raging seas where we are exposed to continual shipwreck without the help of our wise divine pilot in whose care we must abandon ourselves absolutely without wanting to mix ourselves in, except to love and to please him ... "

The feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, to be celebrated on the last day of the octave of the feast of Corpus Christi, reminds us, Father Pedro ARRUIPE said, "is a feast of love and not a feast of suffering. Suffering," he tells us, "is born from a lack of correspondence to the love of Jesus, but by the virtue of this same love, it can be transformed into a true joy. It is thus that the apostle Paul wrote: 'In the midst of their tribulations, the apostles of Christ were saddened, but joyful, they were poor and they enriched others, they had nothing and they possessed all.' " (2 Cor. 6: 10)

The source of joy ... is the heart of Christ, symbol of the love of God for us, He who has so loved the world that He gave his only Son (Jn. 3: 16). Here is the source of happiness, the mysterious means of transforming all into joy, the only joy that is capable of completely overwhelming the heart of man.

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