

Novena to Our Lady of the Sacred Heart - 31 August to 8 September 2019

OUR LADY OF THE SACRED HEART: MOTHER-DISCIPLE

Day 8: Saturday, 07 September – Mass of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart

- Is 66:10-14 – Rejoice Jerusalem, be glad for her, all you who love her!
- Ps 45 – Listen daughter, pay careful attention
- Gal 4:4-7 – When the appointed time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born a subject of the Law, to redeem the subjects of the Law and to enable us to be adopted as sons (and daughters.)
- Jn 19:25-37 – Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdala....Woman this is your Son...This is your mother...one of the soldiers pierced his side with a lance; and immediately there came out blood and water...they will look on the one whom they have pierced.

MOTHERHOOD

Our 9-day pilgrimage with Mary, Our Lady of the Sacred Heart is coming to its end. Today, we are celebrating the Mass of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart. So far we have already seen two of her official images. The original image with Mary standing with her arms and eyes directed towards Jesus who is standing in front of her and the second image with the boy Jesus in Mary’s arms. In both images, the focus is Jesus who beckons us to his open heart. His mother directs us to him. There is a third official image, the biblical image of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart. This is Mary, standing at the foot of the Cross, looking on him whom they have pierced. In this image, the focus is again Jesus, this time hanging on the cross, with his side pierced. Mary stands at the foot of his cross, her whole body directed towards Jesus, her eyes totally focussed on him. With one hand, she points us to him, with the other, she invites us to stand beside her.

In the Gospel of John, the mother of Jesus appears only twice, but in two very significant scenes. In both scenes, the narrator refers to her as “his mother” and Jesus addresses her as “woman.” Her first appearance is in the Gospel’s book of signs, at the wedding in Cana, where we witnessed the first of his signs. Then she disappears in the narrative, only to reappear in the book of glory, at the end of Jesus’ life, at the foot of the cross, a witness to the fulfilment of the “hour” of Jesus where she does not say anything. She is simply there, standing at the foot of his cross, on deathwatch. On one level, in Mary at the foot of the cross, we see the portrait of the suffering mother, who stands there in solidarity with all other mothers who are losing or have lost children including those whose children are victims of injustice and unnecessary violence. Sadly, we have many such mothers in our world today. In the face of such suffering, her mere presence is a source of strength for those who find themselves in a similar situation. She invites them, us, to stand with her at the foot of the cross, in solidarity with all who suffer. A silent, non-violent protest, in our world where there is so much violence!

On another level, we see her as the woman, who was called to be mother, not only to Jesus but also to the beloved disciple and all others who are members of the community of Jesus’ believing disciples. What does Mary’s motherhood mean? Allow me to share with you the ideas of an Australian Theologian, Dorothy Lee. In her book entitled *Flesh and Glory*, she

explains what “motherhood” in the 4th Gospel means.¹ Lee says that the scene at the foot of the cross is difficult to understand at the literal level. She asserts that the need for the adoption ceremony implied that Mary was losing a son and that the beloved disciple was also losing a mother. Jesus is the son that Mary was losing but who is the mother that the beloved disciple is losing? Lee believes that it is also Jesus, “Jesus is the ‘mother’ the beloved disciple is to lose and yet also in a symbolic sense, regain.” For Dorothy Lee, motherhood in the 4th Gospel has its location in Jesus himself. Lee explains this by going back to the bread of life discourse in John chapter 6 where Jesus says “those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me” (Jn.6: 56) and “whoever eats me will live because of me” (Jn.6:57b). Jesus here is not referring to cannibalism but to feeding on a living person. An image where one living person gives to the other ones flesh and blood that the other may have life; that the life flowing in one may also flow to the other. What is this but the image of a mother breastfeeding a child, or a mother with a child in her womb? So for Lee, Jesus presents himself as a mother, one who gives his own flesh and blood that others may live.

Jesus said to his mother “Woman, this is your son” and to the beloved disciple “this is your mother” and the two become the founding figures of the community, their mother-son relationship symbolizes the maternal and filial nature of the community itself. This mother-son relation implies that with Jesus’ departure, the “motherhood” of Jesus, symbolized by Mary, is now located within the community of faith itself.

Then, after the adoption scene, they witness the death of Jesus and the piercing of his side. For Dorothy Lee, the piercing of Jesus’ side and the flow of blood and water is the final maternal image in the gospel. “The mingling of water and blood is particularly evocative of childbirth in which both elements flow.” In this scene, Jesus’ death can be read as the “sorrowful labour that brings forth the joy of life” and “his wounded side is also the ‘womb’ that produces life.” The ones who gaze on him whom they have pierced reveal themselves then to be children of God, born of divine love through the labour of Jesus and the Spirit. This idea is not unique to Dorothy Lee. We also find this idea in the writings of our Founder, Jules Chevalier when he says “from his heart pierced on Calvary, I see a new world emerging,” a new world being born. We also see this idea in our ancient Church documents. In the Office of Readings for Good Friday, we read from the instructions of St John Chrysostom to catechumens – “There came out from his side water and blood. Dearly beloved, do not pass the secret of this great mystery by without reflection. For I have another secret mystical interpretation to give. I said that baptism and the mysteries were symbolised in that water and blood...It is from these two that the Holy Church has been born...It was from his side then, that Christ formed the Church.” Then John Chrysostom continues “have you seen what kind of food he feeds us all? By the same food we are formed and are fed. As a woman feeds her child with her own blood and milk, so too Christ himself continually feeds those whom he has begotten with his own blood.” So who is the mother who gave birth to the Church? It is Christ himself? Who is the mother who feeds the Church with his own flesh and blood to sustain her? It is Christ himself.

Here, in Jesus’ motherhood, lies the true meaning of motherhood. It is not about power or privilege. Rather, it is about giving one’s own flesh and blood that others may have life. It is also then, in this sense, that we understand Mary’s motherhood. Those who are mothers among you, I believe also those who are fathers, know this. The essence of parenthood is this

¹ Dorothy Lee, *Flesh and Glory*, Chapter 8: Giving Birth, Symbols of Motherhood, (The Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, 2002), pages 135-165

– self-giving love that gives and sustains life! Shouldn't this also be the essence of any position of authority – parents, teachers, priests, sisters, civil leaders, bosses etc – the call to leadership is not a call to power or privilege, it is a call to self-giving love, one that promotes and sustains life!

With Jesus as our ultimate model, may we be real “mothers” to each other in our communities. Mary, Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, Mother-Disciple, pray for us that we may learn to give our own flesh and blood that others may have life. Amen.

Biblical Image of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart
Sanctuary of the Basilica of OLSH
Issoudun, France

