

‘Have compassion on the Heart of your Most Holy Mother’

Last month we reflected on the devotion of the Five First Saturdays, at the time of the centenary of the revelation of the devotion by Our Lady to Venerable Lúcia, seer of Fatima, on 10 December 1925. Today we will look at some aspects in more detail.

Our Lady told Lúcia, as one of the conditions for receiving the promise of the graces necessary for salvation at the hour of death, that the devotion had to be carried out ‘with the intention of making reparation’ to her. The reason this reparation was needed had already been spoken in the words of the Child Jesus who was with Our Lady: ‘Have compassion on the Heart of your Most Holy Mother, covered with thorns with which ungrateful men pierce it at every moment, and there is no one to make an act of reparation to remove them’; then in the words of Our Lady herself: ‘Look, my daughter, at my Heart surrounded by thorns, with which ungrateful men pierce me at every moment with blasphemies and ingratitude. You, at least, try to console me...’

In a later communication of Our Lord to Sr Lúcia, it was explained that ‘five’ Saturdays were requested specifically, in view of five different types of offence to Our Lady: (1) blasphemies against her Immaculate Conception; (2) blasphemies against her virginity; (3) blasphemies against her divine maternity, and the refusal to accept her as the Mother of all men; (4) instilling indifference, scorn and even hatred towards this Immaculate Mother in the hearts of children; (5) direct insults against her sacred images.

To a worldly mentality, it can seem incongruous that all this effort be spent in reparation for blasphemy: wouldn’t it be better to offer the prayers for peace, for justice, for things which ‘make a difference’ in this world? Such objections come from a mindset that reduces the Christian religion to an abstract ethical system, rather than a relationship of love and veneration towards real *persons*: specifically, God and his Saints. The sense has been lost of the horror of blasphemy – which, it is claimed, doesn’t ‘hurt’ anyone, since no one can ‘really’ hurt God.

But when we looked recently, in our reflections on Pope Francis’ Encyclical *Dilexit Nos*, on the devotion of ‘consoling’ Our Lord, we saw that there is mystery here. Our sins, and blasphemy in particular, do truly offend against the God who is infinite goodness; and instinctively, the one who loves God knows the need for reparation. Something similar is true regarding offences against Our Lady, whom God himself has loved so much. We can take Our Lord at his word when he says that her Heart is covered with thorns by the offences of ungrateful men.

To avoid misunderstandings of this devotion, as well as that of the Nine First Fridays revealed by Our Lord to St Margaret Mary, it is also helpful to reflect on how they fit into the broader context of Catholic teaching on prayer, grace and salvation. We can do this by considering several ‘objections’ that might be raised.

1. Isn’t it superstitious or ‘mechanical’ to rely on doing something a certain number of times? Is this even a way of trying to ‘force’ God to do something, contrary to the true nature of prayer, which involves humble submission?

It is true that prayer should not attempt to ‘force’ God to make us win the lottery. However, in the case of grace and salvation, we already know that God wants these things. If, indeed, we simply came up *by ourselves* with a number of times that we ‘must’ pray some prayer or other, and thought that by itself, a mere number guaranteed anything spiritual, that would be superstitious. Priests sometimes come across ‘chain prayers’ left in churches that supposedly

‘guarantee a result’ if e.g. the prayer is prayed nine days in succession, with nine copies being left in a church each day. (They immediately dispose of such prayers.)

But the case is different when God himself, seemingly, has specified some number of times. Here the reliance is not on the number itself, but on the divine promise. (There is a distant parallel with the Sacraments, where God does guarantee that grace is imparted through the ritual, as long as the recipient raises no obstacle to grace.) Why would God promise such things in connection with doing things a certain number of times? Well, he knows that we are physical beings and creatures of habit. He condescends to draw us onwards by simple ‘incentives’ of this nature, so that repeating the devotion in view of the divine promise, we become increasingly accustomed to the true spiritual goods of receiving the Sacraments and making the acts of faith and love that are associated with the devotion.

2. Are these devotions attempting salvation by our own works, instead of relying on God’s grace and on the Blood of Christ?

Salvation is indeed totally by the Holy Spirit’s free gift of sanctifying grace (and its associated infused virtues of faith, hope and charity), given to our souls through the merits of Christ’s Passion and imparted in particular through Baptism and the other Sacraments. However, we can *reject* sanctifying grace by mortal sin. We must pray for ourselves and others for the further grace to resist temptation and so persevere in the grace already mercifully given. The devotions of the First Fridays and Saturdays are forms of such prayer, having (if these private revelations are valid) special endorsements from heaven. They operate *within* the whole context of salvation completely through Christ and by grace. And obviously, the very actions of receiving Holy Communion, going to Confession, praying the Rosary and meditating on its Mysteries, are themselves appeals to the grace of God, promised to us through the Sacraments and prayer.

3. According to Catholic teaching, isn’t it heretical to claim an absolute guarantee of salvation, such as these devotions seem to provide?

The Catholic Church at the Council of Trent (rejecting the Calvinist teaching that believers can and must believe in their own personal salvation with the certainty of faith) did indeed infallibly define that no one could in this life be certain of his own personal salvation with the absolute certainty of faith (unless, perchance, he knew this ‘by a special revelation’). (*Decree on Justification* (1547) DS 1566) St Paul teaches that we must ‘work out our salvation with fear and trembling’. (*Phil 2:12*) In relation to the First Fridays and Saturdays, it might be said that the persons who fulfil these devotions in response to these private revelations do indeed (in a way) know their salvation ‘by special revelation’. But we can also say that we don’t know the validity of these private revelations themselves, or whether we have carried out the devotions worthily, with the absolute certainty of faith; so for this reason alone, the person practising the devotion comes only to a high degree of confidence of salvation, not absolute certainty.

4. Couldn’t someone carry out the devotions, then live a life of sin, in smug confidence that they would repent and be forgiven before the end?

We can trust that the graces given through worthy and humble practice of the devotions, while they might not prevent all future mortal sin, would sufficiently set someone on the path of the Sacraments, prayer and virtue, that they would not fall into this sin of presumption and a general life of sin.

So these reflections may clear away some possible misunderstandings, and open us all the more to practise these devotions ourselves and lead others to them – for the salvation of us all, and as a channel to obtain peace for the world, as Our Lady promised at Fatima.