

ST. MARGARET MARY ALACOQUE

by Rev. H. A. Johnston, S.J.

IN the baptismal register of the parish Verosyres can still be read the following entry: "Margaret, daughter of M. Claude Alacoque, royal notary, and his wife, Philiberte Lemain, was baptized by me, the undersigned Cure of Verosvres, Thursday, 25th of July, 1847...." This is the beginning of the story of a wonderful life of grace. The child's birth had taken place three days previously, on July 22nd. It was in the pleasant land of Burgundy, in the small town of Lautecour, that Margaret Alacoque was born and grew up. She had four brothers and two sisters, one brother and one sister being younger than herself. Two sisters died young, so she was left an only sister among four brothers. We have very few of those details about her home, her early years and later, about her surroundings when she was a religious, which gave such a human interest to the life of St. Therese of Lisieux, for instance. In the account of her life, which she wrote when she was 38, at the command of Pere Rolin, S.J., her director, she confined herself almost entirely to the relations between her soul and God.

CHILDHOOD'S HAPPY HOURS

She was a happy and lively child. But God early showed that He had special designs in her regard. Our Lord when on earth had special affection for little children, and He remains the same always. Children seem often to be in close touch with God and the supernatural. So it was with little Margaret. Sin appeared to her something horrible, as indeed it really is. An ebullition of natural high spirits on the part of the child could always be checked by telling her that she would offend God. When she was quite small, she repeated one day at Mass the words, "My God, I consecrate to Thee my purity, and I make a vow to Thee of perpetual chastity." Where the child got the idea we do not know. She tells us herself that she did not know the meaning of "vow" or "chastity" at the time. It may have been the result of some pious conversation which she listened to in the family circle, or an echo of her catechism; but, more likely still, God was speaking to her heart in secret.

Her godmother, a great lady who lived in the castle of Corcheval, four miles away, often had Margaret with her between her fourth and eighth year. The pine-clad hills, the rocky gorges, the music-making streams about Corcheval, must all have had an effect on the child's bright intelligence. The castle contained a chapel, and the facilities this gave for prayer tended to strengthen the bonds which were being woven between her soul and God. "O my only Love," she wrote twenty-five years later, "how much I owe You for having granted me Your benedictions from my most tender years, making Yourself the master and owner of my heart."

When she was eight and a half years of age her father died. He had been a thoroughly good Christian man; even today we can see a cross traced at the head of all the documents written by him as judge and Royal Notary. His death necessitated a change in the family. The mother could not look after the property and give proper attention to her five surviving children. Margaret was sent to school to the Urbanists at Charolles. Her close contact with religious naturally strengthened the ideals of piety when she already possessed. She was found sufficiently developed spiritually to make her First Communion at the then early age of nine. Like many another little girl, she begins to plan to be a nun. But she does not lose her gaiety. She is full of fun and fond of amusement. Then God begins to work out His plans in her. She is good; more, she is holy. But unless God intervenes in a special way, she is not likely to love Him with her whole heart and her whole soul. And He wants the whole of her heart. When she is eleven she falls ill, and for four years she is unable to walk. She is worn away nearly to a skeleton.

This was a hard cross for one of her years. Suffering later became a joy to her, but it was not so at the age of eleven. It is only through the virtues of later years that we can estimate the change it worked in her soul.

Margaret had during her early years a real child's love for Mary, Mother of God. She tells us that Mary saved her from "very great dangers" during her girlhood. When her illness persisted in spite of all remedies a vow was made that if the

child recovered she would be “one of Mary’s daughters.” This brought about her cure, and gave Our Blessed Lady an even more important place in her life. “She made herself so entirely mistress of my heart that she took upon herself the absolute government of me; she reproved me for my faults, and taught me to do the will of God.”

The restoration of her health had another effect, however, on Margaret. At fourteen the memory of pain is soon effaced, and the girl’s natural vivacity and love of enjoyment quickly asserted themselves. She felt the attraction of pleasant things around her, and the affection which her mother and brothers had for her encouraged her in giving herself a good time (her own words: *A me donner du bon temps*). In later life she reproached herself bitterly for levity and especially for once, in company with some of her young friends, appearing disguised during the time of carnival. It was not a great crime, but it was resistance to the urging of grace. God was not yet master of the heart He had made for Himself. Bodily suffering had not succeeded; suffering of mind and spirit was to follow.

THE HAND OF GOD

Some of the property of M. Alacoque had not passed entirely to his widow. His mother, who lived with the family, and a married sister had an interest in it. This sister and her husband, Toussaint Delaroché, were hostile to the Alacoques, and seem to have been of a coarse and bitter disposition. They usurped all authority in the Alacoque household, and the life of mother and daughter became a misery. The Saint’s own words portray it clearly enough. “My mother and I were soon reduced to hard captivity. . . . We had no longer any power in the house, and we dare not do anything without permission. It was a state of continual war. Everything was kept under lock and key, so that I could not even dress myself in order to go to Holy Mass. . . . I acknowledge that I felt keenly this state of slavery. .

“I should have thought myself happy to go and beg my bread rather than live as I was living.” Continual nagging went on in the house, and it was not easy to escape. She could not leave the house without permission of three persons, and when she wanted to go to the church to Mass or Benediction and was refused, the tears which sometimes followed were attributed to vexation at not being able to keep some secret appointment. She was not given enough to eat; she worked like a servant. And God’s design in it all? “Jesus Christ gave me to understand when I was in this state that He wished to make Himself the absolute Master of my heart.” Such suffering would have embittered many a young girl. But earnest prayer and constant meditation on the sufferings which Our Lord had to endure for her enabled Margaret Alacoque to drive every unkind thought from her mind. In the end she came to look upon her persecutors as real benefactors.

Gradually things changed. Her brothers grew up and acquired more authority. Margaret herself was eighteen, her mother looked forward to a good marriage for her, which would help still further towards their emancipation. It was a new trial of a different kind. The love of pleasure, so long suppressed, revealed itself once more. The world began to smile on Margaret, and she quickly responded. She began to pay more attention to dress. She mixed more in society. Eligible young men were encouraged to come to the Alacoque house. The girl felt she was being unfaithful to God’s call and a struggle raged in her soul. She had made a vow of chastity; but then she had not understood what she was doing. She had decided to become a nun but now she felt that she could not persevere. True, she had made a promise to the Blessed Virgin during her illness, but her mother was ill now and wanted her to settle in the world. Could she break her mother’s heart? Then she tried to compromise. She increased her mortifications, but at the same time she did not give up the round of pleasure. She inflicted cruel sufferings on herself, but she would not give Our Lord what He wanted. His grace pursued her, however, and just when she seemed likely to yield to her mother’s wishes, and agree to be married, He spoke so strongly to her one day after Communion, representing how unworthy it would be if, after all His favours, she would turn her back on Him and give herself to another, that she was finally conquered. It was like the snapping of a chain, like the dawning of the day after a troubled night.

The story of the struggle between God and the world in the heart of St. Margaret Mary during the early part of her life has its counterpart in the heart of many a young girl at the present day here in our own country. God is near her in childhood, and she gives her young heart to Him. She passes to a convent school, and opportunities for frequent Communion lead to more intimate friendship with Our Lord. Vacations sometimes bring forgetfulness and carelessness, but Our Lord

wins her heart once more to Himself. Fifteen or sixteen comes, and the beauty and worth of religious life make a strong appeal. She becomes conscious, with a little surprise and perhaps fear, that she has a vocation, that Our Lord is calling her to follow Him. But the dangerous years are at hand. She begins to feel more strongly the attraction of pleasure and amusement. Admiration and flattery bring new and exhilarating sensations. The Voice of God is not heard so clearly. Perhaps, she thinks, she was mistaken in thinking she had a vocation. If she ventures to mention the idea, her friends pooh-pooh it. At any rate, she must wait for a few years and enjoy herself first. Intercourse with the world does the rest and often very often, Our Lord has lost a friend, the Church an apostle, and a soul the grandest opportunity in this life, and a crown of wondrous beauty in life everlasting.

“THE SNARE IS BROKEN”

Margaret Alacoque was not twenty years of age. Her mind was fully made up, and she began to live as devoted a life as she could in preparation for her entry into religion. She prayed much, knowing her own weakness; she gave herself to works of charity; she went to extremes, having no one to guide her in the matter of mortification. Not that her troubles were over.

Four years were to pass before she could give herself to God in religious life. Her mother, and still more her brother, opposed her wish. The Delaroche family resumed their rough treatment. Her relative and godfather, the curé of the parish, who seems to have been infected with Jansenism, was a further obstacle to her, instead of being a help, in the way of God. Then pressure was brought to bear on her to force her against her judgement and God’s wish into a convent where she had a cousin. “I am going to be a religious solely for love of God,” she said. She prayed earnestly that God would send her help. “Is it possible,” was the reply, “that a child so fondly loved as you are should be lost in the arms of an all-powerful Father?”

In 1669, when she was twenty-two, she was confirmed and took the name of Mary. The following year God sent a Franciscan Father to Verosvres, and Margaret Mary opened her heart to him. He checked her extravagances, as, for instance, when she naively transcribed whole pages of sins from examinations of conscience and accused herself of them all; but with regard to her vocation he took her side at once, and spoke strongly to her brother Chrysostom. So the path was cleared at last, and she entered the Visitation Convent at Paray-le-Monial in June, 1671. She was then 24 years of age. She tells us herself of the joy with which she left her home. Even her mother’s tears did not sadden her. But when she was on the point of entering the convent, sadness and fear assailed her, and she felt as if she would die. It had often been thus, before and since, with those who were giving themselves completely to God. The great St. Teresa, writing later in life, says: “I can remember, as if it were today, how, as I was leaving my father’s house, I felt in such a state that I think if I had been at the point of death I could not have felt greater pain.” But the pain soon passed, and the joy which followed was lasting.

A NOVICE

Emphasis has been laid on the difficulties St. Margaret Mary had to contend with, in order to correct the common opinion that saints are turned out as if ready-made. Through the sufferings and trials to which she had been subjected, she had already reached high sanctity. Her spirit of prayer, her union with God, and her love of suffering, were remarkable. God had already conferred very special marks of His favour upon her. Naturally, therefore, she began her religious life with great fervour. There were things she found hard at first, but these were a small price to pay for so great a treasure. She made the mistakes of a beginner, as when she thought she could please God by doing penance for which she had no permission.* She had not always the courage to ask for explanations when she did not understand the instructions of her novice-mistress.

**This is intelligible in a postulant; but it is surprising to find her love of suffering leading her into this same mistake even after her profession. “That was for Me.” Our Lord said to her once, when she prolonged .an act of penance beyond the time for which leave had been given, “What you are doing now is for the devil.”*

About two months after her entrance into the convent she received the habit. This event brought to Sister Margaret Mary intense joy and consolation. God drew her to Himself at first by sweetness, but only in order that she might be strengthened for the perfect sacrifice of self which He desired of her... Naturally enough, she became a little attached to this interior consolation for its own sake, and complained at its withdrawal. Our Lord pointed out her mistake to her. Sanctity does not consist in pious feeling or interior consolation, but in giving up self-love and in loving God for His own sake. "Everyone that doth not renounce all that he possesseth cannot be My disciple." Sister Margaret Mary, then, had to learn to give up all seeking for her own interest; her own convenience, her own honour, her own will. This did not come easy to her. The young religious on her entrance does not leave human nature at the convent gate.

The new novice, prompted by God, asked for humiliations from her novice-mistress. She was refused those she asked, but received others she felt much more keenly. When she had entered the convent, her brother, Chrysostom, had stipulated that she was never to be asked to eat cheese. One day it happened, probably by accident, that cheese was served to her along with the others at table. She felt impelled to make the sacrifice of her dislike. She could not. Her novice-mistress coldly told her she was not worthy to make the sacrifice. Three days of prayer and tears followed, and she succeeded in overcoming herself. Another struggle went on for a long time. Naturally of an affectionate disposition, she became unduly attached to another Sister. Our Lord let her know that this displeased Him, but still she could not give up the satisfaction the attachment yielded her. She tried to love God and indulge herself at the same time. After some months Our Lord delivered an ultimatum, we might say. He let her understand that He did not want a divided heart. If she did not give up creatures He would leave her. Then her good will asserted itself, and she gave herself entirely to God.

Through her superiors and her companions could not but be struck by the fervour of Sister Margaret Mary, her charity, her ready obedience, her joyfulness under humiliation, still the extraordinary union with God which even now she enjoyed during her prayer, and the special graces she received, which she could not hide, seemed to make her unsuitable for the Visitation Order. The year of her noviceship passed, and she was not allowed to take her vows. She was told she would not be useful to the Congregation; her ways were too extraordinary. The novice complained to Our Lord, and was assured she would be more useful than anyone imagined. "Tell your superior that I will answer for you." So, after further tests of her obedience and humility, she was told to prepare for her profession.

CONSECRATED TO GOD

During her retreat before profession she may be said to have lived in heaven. She was a little too anxious about her General Confession, and Our Lord said to her: "Why are you worried? Do what is in your power and I will supply for what is wanting. I require nothing so much in the Sacrament as a contrite and humble heart which, with a sincere wish never to offend Me, accuses itself without pretence." After that, wonderful joy in God took possession of her soul. But then she was shown all she had to suffer during life, and she shuddered at the thought of it. She was told not to fear, however, and Our Lord conferred on her the great grace of being always conscious of His presence. Sometimes this presence of God was to lift her up in transports of love, and she would cry; "O my Love, my Life, my All; You are all mine, and I am all Yours." At other times it was to make her sink down into her own nothingness, and to feel confusion at the thoughts of her own unworthiness in God's sight. Her sentiments at the end of the retreat before her profession may be best understood from what she wrote herself: 'I, poor, miserable nothing, protest to God that I will offer and sacrifice myself in all that He asks of me, offering my heart wholly to the accomplishment of His will without any other desire than that of His greater glory and His pure love to which I consecrate my whole being and every moment of my life. I belong forever to my Beloved as His slave, His handmaid, His creature, since He is everything to me and I am His unworthy spouse, Sister Margaret Mary, dead to the world. All from God, and nothing from myself; all in God and nothing in myself; all for God and nothing for myself.' In those dispositions she consecrated herself to God by the three vows of chastity, obedience, and poverty on the 6th November, 1672.

The period which followed her profession was still a time for probation, and Our Lord still kept preparing her for the work to which He had called her. Through her He was to spread the fire of His love; her own heart must, therefore, be

wholly set on fire. Her daily prayer drew her even closer to God. "I often present myself before Him," she wrote, "as a sick person before an all-powerful Physician. I place myself before Him as a living victim, whose only desire is to be offered as a holocaust in the pure flames of His love." She was more and more drawn by the presence of Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament, and in her hours of adoration His love took fuller possession of her heart. At the same time, she was tried by humiliations and contradictions, lest spiritual joys should beget selfishness. She was still told that she was not walking the safe road of the daughters of St. Francis de Sales. She was sent to do household tasks during the hour of prayer. On Easter Sunday a feeling of discontent rose in her mind on this account, but Our Lord reproved her and said: "The prayer of submission and sacrifice is more agreeable to Me than contemplation and every other kind of meditation, however holy it may appear." Her sanctity was to be solidly built from the foundations.

Sister Margaret Mary, like the other nuns of the convent, was given different offices or charges at different time. First she was assistant infirmarian, and was not a great success outwardly. She was awkward and timid, apparently, quite unlike the active and competent infirmarian, and frequently fell and broke things. She twice had charge of the children, an office for which she felt a great repugnance. But the difficulties and the apparent want of success were doing their work of making her more useful. When she fell into faults of vanity or self-seeking, Our Lord did not allow her to have peace in them. He would be gentle to weakness, but severe to infidelity. He made known to her how much He suffered through the sins of men, and He told her He wanted her, by her unselfish love, to atone for them. Thus Our Lord led her on, step by step, till she could write: "My Beloved has consumed in me every desire but that of receiving His divine love, and has left me without fear of anything except sin." The preparation was complete, and Our Lord could now go on to the accomplishment of His wonderful designs.

GOD'S WAY

If an observer had cast his eye around France towards the end of the year 1673 and considered what events of the day were most likely to have permanent effects on later history, his attention might have fastened on the figure of Louis XIV playing the grand part of Grand Monarque to such perfection; or on Condé and Turenne, winning brilliant victories on the eastern frontier; or on the poets and litterateurs of the time, La Fontaine, Boileau, Racine; or on the pulpits where Bossuet and Bourdaloue moved vast congregations by their eloquence. But he would have known nothing of a Visitation Convent in Paray-le-Monial, or an insignificant member of its community; or if by chance he had known, his thoughts would not have rested there. It is the old story of the diversity between God's ways and thoughts and man's ways. The devotion to the Sacred Heart has had an immense influence in the Church. From it sinners have drawn hope and grace of repentance, while the just have found in it a source of fervour. It has brought countless numbers to the confessional and the altar rail, and has given to the Blessed Sacrament the position in the hearts of Catholics which is Its due. All this can be traced back to Saint Margaret Mary. It is true she had her forerunners; but if devotion to the Sacred Heart and the treasure of grace it contains are no longer the possession of a few privileged souls, but of all the faithful, this is due to the revelations made by Our Lord to the Visitation nun of Paray-le-Monial.

It was most appropriate that on the feast of St. John the Evangelist, December 27, 1673, Our Lord began His great revelations. When Sister Margaret Mary was before the Blessed Sacrament, Our Lord appeared to her,* and, having given her remarkable proofs of His love and tenderness, He made known to her, she writes, the marvels of His love and inexplicable secrets of His Sacred Heart which He had hidden until then. "My Divine Heart," He said, "is so inflamed with love for men, and for you in particular, that, not being able to restrain within itself any longer the flames of its ardent charity, it must spread them everywhere by means of you and manifest itself to men that they may be enriched with its precious treasures."

"Behold the designs for which I have chosen you."

**Whether these appearances were exterior, perceived by the external senses, or interior and intellectual, we have no means of determining.*

THE SACRED HEART

Little by little, during the course of the next two years, 1674 and 1675, Our Lord unfolded the full meaning of devotion to His Sacred Heart. At the next appearance of Our Lord, Sister Margaret Mary saw the divine heart “as if on a throne of flame, more radiant than a sun and transparent as crystal, with its adorable wound. It was surrounded by a crown of thorns, which signified the pain which our sins inflicted on it, and was surmounted by a cross, which signified that from the first moment of His Incarnation, when the Sacred Heart was formed, the cross was planted there, and His Heart felt all the bitterness which would be caused by the humiliations, poverty, grief, and dishonour which the Sacred Humanity would suffer through the course of His life and during His Passion. He made me see that the ardent desire which He had of being loved by men, and of rescuing them from the path of perdition along which Satan drives them in crowds, had made Him form this design of manifesting His Heart to me, with all the treasures of love, of mercy, of grace, of sanctification and of salvation which it contains.” He asked that He should be honoured under the figure of this heart of flesh, and promised that He would scatter His graces and blessings wherever that holy image should be exposed and honoured. “This devotion was, as it were, a last effort of His love for men in these latter ages.”

Some time later the Saint again saw Our Lord, this time with His five wounds shining like five suns, and flames bursting forth from His Sacred Person, but especially from His Heart. Again He made known to her “the inexplicable wonder of His pure love, and to what an excess He had carried His love for men.” But now He added that the ingratitude and forgetfulness which He had met with in return for His burning love caused Him more pain than all the sufferings of His Passion. He asked that Margaret Mary should make up for this ingratitude as much as she could. What was she to do? First, she was to receive Him in Holy Communion as often as she was permitted. Secondly, she was in particular to receive Holy Communion as an act of reparation on the First Friday of each month. Thirdly, she was to spend the hour from eleven to twelve every Thursday night in His company, sharing with Him the sorrow by which He was crushed at Gethsemane.

FEAST OF LOVE

The last of the great revelations came on a day within the octave of Corpus Christi, 1675. The Saint knelt again before the Blessed Sacrament, and as she expressed her desire to make some return to Our Lord for His wonderful love for her, He told her she could do nothing greater than what He already often asked of her. Showing His Heart, He said: “Behold this Heart which has so loved men, which has spared nothing, even to being exhausted and consumed, in order to testify to them Its love, And the greater number of them make Me no other return than ingratitude, by their coldness and forgetfulness of me in this Sacrament of love. But what is still more painful to Me is that it is hearts who are consecrated to Me that treat Me thus.” After this Our Lord went on to ask for something new, for the establishment of a public feast in honour of His Sacred Heart on the Friday after the octave of Corpus Christi: “I promise you that My Heart will pour out in abundance the effects of its divine love on all those who will render it this honour or cause it to be so honoured.” When Margaret Mary very naturally put forward her powerlessness, Our Lord first reminded her that it was customary with Him to make use of little ones that were poor in spirit for His greatest works that His power might shine forth more clearly. Then He told her to have recourse to His servant, Father de la Colombiere, S.J., who would assist her.

Thus did Our Lord give to the world this treasure of devotion to His Sacred Heart. In a sense the devotion was not new. Even in the Old Law, God said of His erring children: “I will draw them with the cords of Adam, with the bands of love.” In the Incarnation the goodness and kindness of God our Saviour were made manifest to men. But even then “His own received Him not.” His benefits were met by injury. “Many good works have I showed you from My Father,” Our Lord said to the Jews, “for which of those works do you stone Me?” “Watch and pray with Me,” was the request to the Apostles on Mount Olivet. All the elements of devotion to the Sacred Heart were thus in the Church from the beginning. St. John, the beloved disciple, had expressed its spirit when he wrote, “God is love.” In His revelations, then, to St. Margaret Mary, Our Lord was only making a fresh effort to secure the object for which He had come among men, “to cast fire on the earth.” “The great desire Our Lord has that His Sacred Heart should be honoured by some particular devotion,” we read in

one of Margaret Mary's letters, "is in order to renew in souls the effect of His Redemption."

SO AS BY FIRE

We are always inclined to pay too much attention to the favours the Saints received from God, and to overlook the price which they paid for them. Sister Margaret Mary had to pay very highly for the great graces she received. "He taught me first," she writes, "that His special graces would always be accompanied by some humiliation, contradiction or contempt on the part of creatures." We have seen how she was looked upon with suspicion while she was a novice. Matters did not improve after her profession in November, 1672. As the workings of God's grace grew manifest, she attracted more attention. Joking grew into mockery; she was called a visionary and a hypocrite. Even the children in the Convent noted and wondered at the unkind things that were said and done to her. And all the time she herself was haunted by a terrible dread that she was being deceived. Her superior told her to consult several learned directors; and they were unanimous in their opinion that she was deluded. The great revelations of the Sacred Heart, which began about a year after her profession, only increased her trials. Our Lord had told her to keep nothing concealed from her superior. Though, as she says herself, she would have preferred to read out her general confession in the refectory, she told everything to Mother de Saumaise. The Reverend Mother treated with contempt all she told her, and refused to allow her to carry out any of the things she believed Our Lord had asked of her. A little later a miraculous recovery from illness, which had been asked for as a sign from God, convinced Mother de Saumaise that Margaret Mary was led by the Spirit of God. Nonetheless, she continued to try her by her snubs and contradictions.

The community of Paray-le-Monial was on the whole a fervent one, but Our Lord had cause for complaint with not a few of its members on account of their love of esteem and their want of charity. In fact, His words about the deliberate faults of these religious are terrifying. Margaret was called upon to make herself a victim for them. In November 1677, she was asked for what was the greatest sacrifice of her life. At first she could not bring herself to yield, but Our Lord persuaded her, and at last, on the eve of the Presentation of Our Lady, she was literally forced to do what He asked of her. When the Sisters were assembled in the evening Margaret Mary, having obtained her superior's leave, knelt in the midst of them, and made known Our Lord's message, that He was angry with the community on account of certain faults, and that He had chosen her as the victim of His injured love. We can imagine the feelings this declaration would arouse. Sister Margaret Mary was only a few years professed; she had excited adverse comment by her ways of acting; and now she publicly censures the whole community. The Saint herself felt the situation keenly. "I never suffered so much," she states simply in her account of the incident. Matters were made worse when the superior gave orders for an act of mortification to be performed that night by all in order to appease the anger of God. Some of the less fervent nuns sought out Sister Margaret Mary, questioned her, insulted her, and treated her as mad and possessed by the devil.

THE FLESH IS WEAK

In the following year, 1678, Mother de Saumaise left Paray-le-Monial. In her Margaret lost a superior who had come to understand and sympathize with her, and one for whom she herself admits, she had a special affection. "I have felt our separation," the Saint wrote soon after, "although it is only in body, more than I can tell you." The next superior was a Mother Greyfie. At her coming she writes, "I found opinion very much divided about this true Spouse of Jesus Crucified." That is a good description of her. Margaret Mary says herself: "When I think of Our Lord on the Cross, life without suffering becomes insupportable to me." This does not mean that she found suffering easy to bear. When Our Lord offered her a choice between "the happiest life imaginable for a religious: a life of peace, of interior and exterior consolation, and of perfect health," and "a poor, an abject life; crucified, despised, contradicted, always suffering both in body and soul, she accepted the latter: but her whole nature revolted. "Crosses were a real joy to her," wrote Mother de Saumaise, "but she felt them keenly." She had a constant struggle with herself, with her own weakness and inconsistency," as she put it. "I am not faithful, and I fail often," she sorrowfully confesses. In order to overcome herself, as we have seen, she had to take a vow to accept any employment given to her, to answer letters, and to go to the parlour

as the rule prescribed. But these and other things never became easy. "My dislikes," she states in later life, "seem rather to increase than diminish."

It is, therefore, one with human feelings and human weakness whom we must think of as bearing her cross so faithfully to the end. If we could trace her life step by step we should find it always, till just near the end, a life of suffering and self-sacrifice. We should find the trials which she underwent at the hands of others continuing. We should find her tempted to vanity and despair. We should see her going humbly to her superior when attacked by ravenous hunger, and sometimes being told to go to the dispenser for something to eat, at other times being coldly told to wait and satisfy her hunger with the rest of the community. Mother Greyfie did not spoil her. "I hardly ever let anyone see," she writes, "that I believed anything extraordinary about her. I never spoke to her either inside or outside the house. If she did anything that displeased others, even by my orders or permission, I allowed others to blame her, and blamed her myself if it were done in my presence." At the same time Mother Greyfie was a great help to her, and encouraged her to bear her sufferings with meekness and humility. The following piece of advice which she wrote for Sister Margaret Mary is striking in its common-sense, and at the same time lets us see that the task of becoming a Saint is a very homely one after all: "Your most excellent practice of mortification and penance will be to adapt your humours and inclinations to each occasion as it comes, and not to show exteriorly what you suffer interiorly. Be happy at recreation, always amiable and kind to your Sisters, and to anybody you have to deal with; and be devout in all your duties to God."

THE HIDDEN FIRE

And what of devotion to the Sacred Heart all this time? At first we have seen Margaret Mary's accounts of the messages she received from God were not credited. In January, 1675, before the last of the great revelations, Father Claude de la Colombiere was appointed Rector of the small Jesuit House at Paray. "A gifted man wasted in such a position," said those who overlooked God's providence. Margaret Mary opened her heart to him, and, while receiving advice calculated to keep her firmly rooted in humility, she was told to follow without fear where God led her, always being careful about obedience. The ill-disposed declared that Margaret Mary was deceiving Father de la Colombiere, as she had already deceived many others. She made known to him what Our Lord had asked of her with regard to devotion to the Sacred Heart, and was greatly edified by the humility with which he received the message that he had been chosen by Our Lord to be the apostle of the new devotion. Father de la Colombiere spent only a year and a half at Paray, and then, to the sorrow of Margaret Mary, was sent to London in the middle of the year 1676. In his parting message, he reminded her that God asked of her everything and nothing; everything, because He wanted complete surrender to His Will; nothing, because the work should be all His and the glory all His.

Father de la Colombiere spent two years in England, the first apostle of the Sacred Heart. It was during these years that St. Margaret Mary had her greatest trial, in 1677, as described already. At the beginning of 1679, Father de la Colombiere was driven out of England. He paid a passing visit to Paray-le-Monial, and was able to encourage Sister Margaret Mary in some of the painful temptations, already alluded to, which she was suffering. He also reassured the superior, Mother Greyfie, who had come to Paray in his absence.

"Humility, simplicity, exact obedience, and mortification," he said, "are not the fruits of the spirit of darkness." In the Autumn of 1681 Father de la Colombiere returned to Paray, this time to die. Sister Margaret Mary saw him twice, but he could speak only with difficulty. When he died in February, 1682, she spoke of him as a Saint, frequently asked his intercession, and asserted that his prayers in heaven would do much to spread devotion to the Sacred Heart. This devotion, Our Lord told Margaret Mary, was to be given in a special way to the Fathers of the Society of Jesus to propagate. The Venerable Claude de la Colombiere was a worthy pioneer.

In 1684 Mother Greyfie left Paray. She had been convinced of the true sanctity of Sister Margaret Mary, and, better still, had been imbued with her zeal for the interests of the Sacred Heart. Two of the Saint's superiors, having kindled their lamps at the shrine of Paray, were now carrying the light of devotion to other communities. This was a consolation to Margaret Mary in her many trials. She herself tried to do what she could to win others to the love of the Sacred Heart, but

she met with such opposition that she was tempted to give up. She persevered, “for,” as she wrote to Mother de Saumaise, “difficulties are an assurance that the work is God’s, and that He will be much glorified by it.”

APOSTOLATE

In January, 1685, the new superior appointed Sister Margaret Mary mistress of novices. The post brought both its consolations and its trials. On the one hand, she could speak freely to the novices and communicate to them some of her own burning love for Our Lord. “Our Mother,” the novice said, “is like another St. John, and can only speak the language of love.” On the other hand, some of the older nuns were upset by her “new” devotions and threatened to denounce her to the Bishop. She got into great trouble because she decided against the vocation of a postulant from a distinguished family. The old complaints broke out afresh. Father Rolin, S.J., who was now her director (it is to his orders that we owe Margaret Mary’s account of her life), bade her to be of good heart. “All the names people call you, humiliating as they are, ought only to make you thank God, and pray for those who say such things.” On her feast day, July 20th, the novices determined to prepare a pleasant surprise for her. They rose in the middle of the night—let us hope with permission— and prepared an altar with a little picture of the Sacred Heart. Then, wishing to be free in the morning, they did their work in the refectory, but in their eagerness—novice-like—they made too much noise and drew forth complaints from the older Sisters, who were disturbed in their slumbers, and earned an admonition from the superior. In the morning, the mistress and her novices consecrated themselves to the Sacred Heart. During the day Margaret Mary sent a novice to invite some of the rest of the community to join in the devotion. “Go and tell your mistress,” was the cold reply, “that the best devotion is the practice of our rules and constitutions.” In point of fact, there was no lack of solidity in the training the novices were getting. Meekness, humility, charity, self-sacrifice—these, as we might expect, were the virtues the novice mistress laid most stress on. She did not lead these young religious by strange and dangerous ways. “The way of God for us,” she told them, “is by our holy rules.”

HE MUST REIGN

But the hour of triumph was at hand. The very next year after the events just revealed, on the octave day of Corpus Christi, 1686, one of the Sisters who had been most opposed to the new devotion went to Margaret Mary and asked for the picture of the Sacred Heart. The next day, the very day Our Lord Himself had chosen as the feast of the Sacred Heart, to the surprise of all, an altar to the Sacred Heart was prepared in the nuns’ choir. Our Lord had conquered, and the change which the adoption of the devotion wrought in the spirit of fervour of the community was observed by all. Two years later, in 1688, a chapel erected in the garden of the convent in honour of the Sacred Heart was solemnly blessed.

Of the remaining two years of Margaret Mary’s life there is little to be told. “I can no longer occupy myself with anything but the Sacred Heart of Jesus,” she confessed. She was now Mother Assistant and, though outward trials ceased, she suffered, if possible, still more interiorly. All the time she was working and praying for the spread of the devotion. In spite of her great repugnance, she wrote many letters. The published notes of the retreat of Father de la Colombiere were now in circulation, a source of joy to the Saint, and at the same time of “frightful shame and confusion,” because of some references in them to herself. Various Visitation convents had taken up the devotion warmly. A Jesuit, Father Croisset, had published a little book on the subject. Margaret Mary said it was time for her to die. Indeed, she was worn out by suffering and love.

COME LORD JESUS

The year 1690 came, and with it the end of suffering. Margaret Mary could not understand the calm she experienced. The temple of God was finished, the noise of hammer and chisel ceased, and the scaffolding was cleared away. The love of Christ had overcome everything that could oppose it, and perfect peace ensued. The venturesome and perilous voyage was over, and the vessel had come under lee of the shore. On the 8th of October the Saint was taken ill. Though the doctor said there was no danger, she knew the end was come. Nine days of preparation were given her; then one last struggle, as

the thought of God's purity came over her, and finally peace again, never to be broken, as she gave up her soul to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. "How sweet it is to die," she had once written, "after having had a constant devotion to the Heart of Him who is to be our Judge!" Her birthday into eternal life was October 17th, 1690. She was beatified by Pius IX in 1864 and canonized by Benedict XV in 1921.

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THE TWELVE PROMISES

of the Sacred Heart to St. Margaret Mary concerning all who practise devotion to the Sacred Heart.

1. I will give them all the graces necessary for their state of life.
2. I will give peace in their families.
3. I will console them in all their troubles.
4. They will find in my Heart an assured refuge during life and especially at the hour of death.
5. I will pour abundant blessings on all their undertakings.
6. Sinners will find in my Heart the source and infinite ocean of mercy.
7. Tepid souls shall become fervent.
8. Fervent souls will speedily rise to great perfection.
9. I will bless the homes in which the image of my Sacred Heart is exposed and honoured.
10. I will give to priests the power to touch the most hardened hearts.
11. Those who spread this devotion will have their name written in my Heart, never to be effaced.
12. The all-powerful love of my Heart will grant to all those who shall receive Communion on the First Friday of nine consecutive months, the grace of final repentance; they shall not die under my displeasure, nor without receiving their Sacraments; my Heart will be their assured refuge at that last hour.
