

Homily for the Feast of the Immaculate Heart of Mary

My dear friends, in the fullness of time and fulfilling His promise to restore all of humanity, God sent an angel to Mary. Praising her immaculate heart, the angel announced that she was highly favored, full of grace. It was therefore, most appropriate that she should conceive and bear a son, to be called Son of the Most High! And Mary responded to God's call to divine motherhood with her heart full of love, "Be it done to me according to your word."

Then at the presentation of her infant child to the Lord, Simeon prophesized that her son would be the instrument of Israel's salvation as well as a sign of contradiction. Turning to Mary he added, "And you, yourself a sword will pierce, so that the thoughts of many hearts may be laid bare." For Mary, much like her divine Son, would act like a mirror. People would either accept or reject them, according to the reflection of their own hearts. And she responded, "Be it done to me according to your word."

And we hear in today's Gospel how Mary and Joseph frantically searched for the teen-aged son. From His mother's perspective, Jesus was lost, but from the Boy's, he was at home with his Father! Their confrontation presents a rather dramatic penetration of hearts between parents and child, especially when Jesus replied, "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house!" This statement definitely created an atmosphere of tension and separation between them; the reverence owed by a child to his parents and the compulsion of an even higher allegiance.

If her divine Son was commissioned by God to procure mankind's salvation through suffering and sorrow, so was she! If her divine Son willed the cross for Himself, so too He willed a sword of sorrow for her! God's purifying flame can occasionally enter a soul like a two edged sword, and Mary had already felt the cutting edge of separation. But the flame of love displayed above her pierced immaculate heart, depicts a life of faithful perseverance amidst anguish and sorrows, forever trusting in God's providential care. Mary had chosen motherhood, and in doing so, like all mothers, had put her heart completely on the line! But again and again, even as her heart was breaking while at the foot of the cross, we hear her faithful assent, "Be it done to me according to your word!"

We also see this mystery of redemptive suffering, faithfully born in the Motherhood of our Church. And our holy and enduring Church lives on and is constantly renewed, in a very special way, by those called by God as His servants, to inspire and revitalize Her. One such a person, called for this purpose, was the

Venerable John Henry Cardinal Newman. Borrowing from the example of our Blessed Mother, Newman seized upon every opportunity to exercise and perfect his faith, always trusting in God's loving providence, especially during times of persistent sorrow and misfortune.

With this in mind, Cardinal Newman once wrote, "True religion has two sides to it, a beautiful side and a severe side. And we all will surely stray from the narrow path that leads to life, if we indulge ourselves in what is beautiful, while putting aside what is severe."

Cardinal Newman commenting on this issue once wrote, "Religion is not meant to make an earthly person feel good, or secure in his station in life. On the contrary, true religion is to touch our hearts and souls, to incline us to seek to do the will of God. And it promises to transform us into Christ's own image, but most often at the expense of worldly suffering and poverty."

In Cardinal Newman's examination of faith he once explained, "It is a practical perception of the unseen world. It is to understand that this world is not enough for our happiness. We must look beyond it to realize His presence, to serve Him, to do His will and to surrender oneself totally to God. To have faith in God is to humbly put one's own interests into His hands, He, who is the sovereign Giver of all good."

In Sermon 16 of Newman's "Parochial and Plain Sermons", he assures us that our compassionate Father will always act in our best interest, and for our greater good, especially when our hearts are immersed in sorrow. He says, "The spirits of the just are made perfect through suffering, and are encouraged to follow Christ." With this in mind, Newman wrote his celebrated poem, "Lead me on, kindly light of Truth, amidst the encircling gloom...I ask not to see the distant scene, one step is enough for me."

Therefore Newman counsels, "Never disdain the discipline of the Lord, or loose heart when He reproveth you, for God only permits, what is for our profit." And so Cardinal Newman surrendered his will, to follow that kindly light of truth, but frequently at great cost to himself! He often reflected on "God's Call" concluding that God has destined him for some great undertaking, but what it was eluded him. His prayer, "Be it done according to your word!"

One Newman scholar once characterized Cardinal Newman as follows, "His life portrays an image of a man who never knew earthly success, although he became one of the greatest writers in Church history. He seems to be always running after his destiny. When involved in one field of action, the ground would suddenly give way

beneath him. There was something extraordinarily significant about such an existence, which seemed to draw upon itself, by a mysterious fate, unforeseeable setbacks and frustrations.

Some of Cardinal Newman's greatest works came as a result of his responding either to personal attacks or attacks leveled against the Church. And it was by dealing with these constant criticisms that enabled him to acquire his remarkable insights! He once wrote, "All things are ours, and they all work together, even in our trials and sorrows, for our greater good!"

So often our trials and sorrows, the severe side of religion, which so distress us in their present moment, do ultimately have lasting significance for some greater good, or the realization of some higher purpose, surely the beautiful side of religion. And in our perseverance, we begin to discern God's Spirit guiding us, prompting us, to follow "His kindly light of truth," along the narrow path He has chosen for each of us.

And so it was with me in mid-August of 2001, the Feast of Mary's Assumption. I was tragically afflicted with a serious spinal condition, causing intolerable pain with utterly no prospect of relief. One surgeon told me that I was on the brink of complete paralysis! You see, five days earlier, I had undergone spinal surgery because my lumbar vertebrae and discs were literally squeezing the life out of my spinal cord. During the procedure the surgeons unfortunately encountered serious complications. My dura mater or protective lining surrounding the spinal cord was badly torn. It had been that way for several months. For days after the surgery, I was still suffering incredible pain with no relief in sight. If I were lucky, my recovery would not take, at a minimum, six to eight months. My affliction was made more serious, because it would prevent me from completing my formation classes to be ordained a deacon in the Archdiocese of Boston.

You see, I was scheduled to begin my fourth and final year in less than one month, and I was completely devastated when it became obvious that my ordination was no longer possible! After I was told I couldn't return to classes, I felt compelled to get out of my hospital bed, and attempt to walk. But the pain was so agonizing that it took me more than ten minutes merely to slide to the edge of my bed, and with a nurse's help, to put my feet onto the floor, leaning on my bed for support. I was completely helpless and the situation now seemed hopeless! It was this severe moment that led me to prayer! I called upon my very special intercessor and faithful friend, "Please Cardinal Newman, help to me to walk, so that I can return to classes and be ordained."

Suddenly I felt a tremendous sensation of intense heat all over, and a strong tingling feeling throughout my body, both of which lasted for a long time! I also felt an indescribable sense of joy and peace, as though in the presence of God, and a strong sense of confidence and determination that finally, I could walk! When this beautiful occurrence subsided, I realized I was standing upright, and I immediately exclaimed to the nurse, "I have no more pain," whereas minutes before, I was bent over in complete agony! During these precious moments, I was totally captivated, totally transfixed by God's loving presence! I had utterly no will power of my own! Then I realized that now I could walk, when I couldn't for months! I could walk upright! I could walk with strength in my back and in my legs! My response, "Be id done to me according to your word!"

Totally invigorated, I sprinted out of my room and then up and down all the corridors on my floor, with the nurse tagging behind shouting "Slow down! Slow down!" Immediately thereafter, I was discharged, and to everyone's astonishment, returned to my classes on time!

One year later, on September 14, 2002, the Feast of the Triumph of the Cross, I was ordained a deacon at the Cathedral of the Holy Cross in Boston, And without knowing the date of my ordination, the Postulator for Newman's cause notified me, on that same day, that the Fathers at the Birmingham Oratory had voted to formally initiate the process for the beatification of their founder, the Venerable John Henry Cardinal Newman, and to take my case to Rome.

Was this notification a providential sign from God that my prayer to Cardinal Newman was miraculously answered? I know that it was a beautiful sign, affirming not only that my remarkable healing came from God at Cardinal Newman's intercession, but also through my suffering, some greater good, some higher purpose might be achieved. That Cardinal Newman would soon be counted as one of the Blessed in Heaven! God bless you all, Deacon Jack Sullivan.