

## **Father Cassian Koenemann**

### **Homily for Holy Family at Saint Louis Abbey**

Ecclesiasticus 3:3-7,14-17; Colossians 3:12-21; Matthew 2:13-15,19-23

**Focus Statement:** Put on Christ

**Function Statement:** Connect with Christ by way of the image of the Sacred Heart

Beatrice Portinari's combination of beauty, graceful bearing, wisdom, and well-ordered love so captivated Dante Alighieri that he took to writing poetry in order to vent his soul. When her eyes sent a light into the darkness of his soul, he was lifted from any desire to be with the "vulgar herd" of men and was carried away with "the desire for righteousness." Upon encountering Beatrice, Dante no longer wanted to live his old life, and so his collection of poems dedicated to her were entitled: the New Life (La Vita Nuova). There was undoubtedly a connection between the two of them, but due to her short life Dante never received the consoling embrace of being fully accepted by Beatrice. Their love never moved beyond mutual respect into the deeper stages of mutual acceptance and a shared life. Furthermore, Dante's love probably needed to move beyond some element of adoration. His passion for her was so intense that upon seeing her again in the Garden of Eden at the foot of Purgatory, he still needed to purify himself of his fixed attention on her in order to travel with her through the circles of heaven. His poetry, though, gives us many indications of the nature of love. Please reflect deeply, dear married couples, about this *new life* that you received –and have hopefully continually grown– upon meeting your spouse, upon agreeing to walk together through life, upon forging a covenantal marriage bond, and upon the starting a new family. Setting aside concerns about how your love has changed over time, recall for the moment this fact: from the glimpses they see of your commitment and the effects they feel from your love, children yearn for this new life; teenagers attempt to replicate it with puppy love; and young people, outside of the warmth of family life, mourn preemptively for the fear of never having re-attained it. To many people, life seems incomplete, almost even empty, until the new life of love, of mutual commitment, and of a shared life that fructifies into family life is found. Given how people dread loneliness, to *have* someone makes life seem new –or at least so goes the poetry of love.

In the movies and books, a man and a woman, after a long trial of their love, get married and live "happily ever after," but real life isn't that simple. There can be real problems within marriage. Perhaps there have always been real problems in every marriage, for each spouse brings his or her own problems to it. Unless each spouse works at overcoming the isolation of selfishness, he or she can alienate the other. A hardening of the heart against one's spouse is perhaps difficult to avoid. Unless each spouse works at re-connecting with the other, there can be bitterness and emotional withdrawal, especially when the flow of love is blocked by many mistakes, confusions, missed opportunities, duties, and hardships. Unless mutual acceptance, approval, and appreciation grow over time, greater problems can occur. These many issues indicate that marriage is not the full or automatic solution to one's loneliness, emptiness, or issues.

We need to allow the love of God to fill us in order to give a fully integrated love to others. Beatrice Portinari, I surmise, so attracted Dante Allighieri because she was radiant with the self composure that comes from allowing oneself to be fully loved by God, for there is no beauty so radiant and attractive as holiness. Dante presented her as personifying the ideal in our 2nd reading, of one clothed with the love of God, "in sincere compassion, in kindness and humility, gentleness and patience." Beatrice could love Dante properly

because she had already been aware of having a deeper love within herself, because she had already “put on Christ,” to use Saint Paul’s phrase. Another way of saying it is that she had “let the message of Christ, *in all its richness*, find a home with [her],” and so she was able to be a sign of someone who could share that richness with others. When our loneliness, emptiness, or issues are filled by God’s love, then we can properly respond to those we are called to love. The true “new life” of love comes from having received the grace of God and a relationship with the indwelling Trinity. The Father has guided every aspect of the process of our natural life and our re-creation. Jesus has offered us our “new life” of grace and his Sacramental Presence and assistance. The Holy Spirit gives us the fire of his Presence and the gifts to live life at an elevated level. We need, above all, to open ourselves to accepting this “new life” from God in ever greater fashion. It is for this type of relationship that you were called to be Christians; listen to the 2<sup>nd</sup> reading call you to it:

*You are God’s chosen race, his saints; he loves you, and you should be clothed [i.e., to allow Christ to clothe you] in sincere compassion, in kindness and humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with one another; forgive each other as soon as a quarrel begins. The Lord has forgiven you; now you must do the same. Over all these clothes, to keep them together and complete them, put on love [i.e., allow God to vest you in love]. And may the peace of Christ reign in your hearts, because it is for this that you were called together as parts of one body. Always be thankful.*

These are not moral commands; these are invitations as to what can happen when “you put on Christ.” God is inviting you to a relationship in which he will give you a “new life” that will allow you to love the Persons of the Trinity and other people properly.

In the divine comedy, Beatrice Portinari is given as saying, “My countenance sustained [Dante] for a while; showing my youthful eyes to him, I led him with me toward the way of righteousness.” Here we read sacramental imagery for Dante’s love for Beatrice: her love was his sustenance, for a while. Given the place of this quote in the divine comedy, at the transition towards Dante’s ascent to heaven, this love should not be read as a replacement for the divine sustenance but as a sign pointing towards the deeper reality, especially since Beatrice was always leading Dante towards a fuller relationship with God. Those of you who may not yet know what a relationship with Christ could fully be, take your knowledge of the deep connection of eyes between lovers as a sign of it. God cannot take his eyes off of you. You fascinate him; you are his obsession. A practical way of returning Jesus’s gaze would be to buy yourself a devotional image of Christ looking straight out from the image, for example like the one entitled the Sacred heart in which there is a symbolic heart aflame of love for you, to sit before it, to stare eye to eye at Jesus in it, and thereby to allow Jesus to peer into your soul, pledging his love for you. Let the light of Jesus’s eyes shine into whatever darkness is in your soul in the same way that the light of Beatrice’s eyes pierced Dante’s soul. The image will serve as a window to a heavenly reality, and in that encounter you can begin or rekindle a conversation, a relationship, a love. This process can be fruitful for someone of every spiritual stage. Saint Teresa of Avila argues from the Scriptural passage that “No one comes to the Father except through [Jesus]” that the humanity of Christ is the primary “way” by which one goes to the Father and that to deviate from this way too quickly would be rash.<sup>1</sup> Saint Teresa adds, “*As a rule,*

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<sup>1</sup> P. Marie-Eugène, O.C.D. *I Want to See God*. Vol I. (FIDES, Chicago, IL: 1953). Chapter V: The Good Jesus, p. 64-79

*our thought must have something to lean upon, though sometimes the soul may go out of itself and very often may be so full of God that it will need no created thing to assist it in its recollection. But this is not very usual: when we are busy, or suffering persecutions or trials, when we cannot get as much quiet as we should like, and at seasons of aridity, we have a very good friend in Christ.*"<sup>2</sup> So, use an image of the Sacred Heart in this way regularly, saying to yourself "I am loved by Christ," and your relationship will grow. (For those already connected with Christ, merely reminding yourselves a few times daily that "I am loved by Christ" would help to grow your relationship.) Eventually you will find yourself wanting to have a conversation with the Father, the Son, *or* the Holy Spirit at other points in your day, thereby giving them your concerns or compliments. Eventually you can grow these encounters into practicing the presence of God in your daily life and/or into making visits to the Blessed Sacrament and/or into coming to daily Mass. In connecting with the Presence of God and building it in your life, Jesus will become your Sustenance, and the Holy Spirit will fill your days and your emptiness. In following these practices, you will "put on Christ" as Saint Paul urges us to do. Let Christ into your life, and He will fill you and fulfill your love to others.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p 70; ("Mansions, p 306.")