

Lecture presented during Poland's national symposium:
"Communities for the Enthronement of the
Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, King of Kings and Lord of Lords
Lagiewniki, Krakow, Poland * June 15, 2013

Witnesses to the faith and love of the Sacred Heart of Jesus: St. Joseph Sebastian Pelczar

"The saints and Blessed make a lively argument in favor of the road that leads to the kingdom of heaven. These are people - like all of us - who walked this path during their earthly life, and who arrived [...] these are Christians in the fullest sense of the word."

Taken from the homily at the beatification of St. Joseph Sebastian Pelczar, these words are an incentive to us to not only seek the saints' intercession but also to deepen our knowledge of their heritage and find therein our inspiration for the fruitful realization of our Christian vocation. Let us now then consider an individual who while he may unfortunately not be widely known is certainly worth knowing, particularly by adorers of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Joseph Sebastian Pelczar was born on January 17, 1842 in the Subcarpathian town of Korczyn, near Krosno. He spent his childhood in his birthplace, brought up in an atmosphere of traditional Polish piety. His parents, recognizing their son's exceptional talents, after two years at the local school sent him to study in Rzeszow.

As a high school student Joseph Sebastian decided to give himself to the service of God; as he expressed in his diary, "Earthly ideals are fading away; I see the ideal of life in sacrifice, and the ideal of sacrifice in priesthood." After graduating from the sixth grade he entered the minor seminary and afterwards in 1860 began his study of theology at the major seminary in Przemysl.

After ordination, he worked for six months as an assistant pastor in Sambor. Sent off next to Rome, he studied at the Collegium Romanum and the Institute of St Apollinaris whereupon besides acquiring knowledge, he developed a great, unwavering love for the Church and its visible head, the Pope. Shortly after his return to his homeland, he took up duties as professor at the seminary in Przemysl, and subsequently, for the next 22 years, worked at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow. As professor and dean of the department of theology, he gained the reputation of being a learned man, an excellent organizer and friend to youth. Desiring to pursue his ideal of "a Polish priest, working devotedly for the people," Fr. Pelczar did not limit himself only to academics, but selflessly devoted himself to social and charitable works.

In 1899, he was appointed auxiliary bishop, and a year later, became ordinary of the diocese of Przemysl. For the twenty-five years of his episcopate, he was known to be a zealous pastor, concerned for the good of the souls entrusted to his care.

Bishop Pelczar engaged tirelessly in social and religious action despite poor

health. In order to encourage the faithful to stir up in themselves the spirit of faith, he frequently made visits to the parishes of his diocese, cultivated a high moral and intellectual level for the clergy, and at the same time himself gave an example of deep devotion, as expressed in his devotion to the Heart of Jesus and to the Mother of God. He was an ardent adorer of the Most Blessed Sacrament and encouraged the faithful to participate in Eucharistic devotions.

St. Joseph Sebastian was aware of the needs of the faithful and took care of the poorest of his diocese. A few of the charitable endeavors at his initiative were: Nurseries for children, soup kitchens for the poor, homeless shelters, domestic schools for girls, and free seminary education for young men of poor families, are only a few of the charitable accomplishments of his initiative. He sorrowed over the afflictions of workers, and devoted much care to the problems of emigration and alcoholism. Generously endowed by God, he did not waste his talents, but developed and increased them. One proof of his hard work are his many writings.

Bishop Pelczar died on the night of March 28, 1924. Fr. Anthony Bystrzonowski, student and successor of Fr. Pelczar at the university, said about him on the day of his funeral, "The late bishop of Przemysl combined in his person, the most beautiful qualities and talents of the episcopate: untiring pastoral zeal, a spirit of initiative, energy in action, brilliance of knowledge, and ever-increasing virtue. He was, above all, a shining example, and model of outstanding achievement accomplished with truly youthful vigor."

On June 2, 1991, during his fourth pilgrimage to Poland, the Holy Father John Paul II beatified Bishop Joseph Sebastian in Rzeszow, and in Rome on May 18, 2003, proclaimed him a saint. His relics repose in the Cathedral in Przemysl. In Krakow, he is venerated in a special way in the church of the Sister Servants of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus. The liturgical memorial of Saint Joseph Sebastian is observed on January 19.

One of the main features of his spirituality, next to devotion to the Most Blessed Sacrament, and to the Mother of God, was his devotion to the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus. Interestingly, he encountered this devotion as an adult, as a priest and professor at the Przemysl seminary. This may surprise some, but we must keep in mind that in Poland at the beginning of the 19th century, due to the suppression of the Jesuits who were its main promulgators, as well as to the reforms of Emperor Franz Joseph, this devotion was almost forgotten. Its resurgence took place in the second half of the nineteenth century, due to the establishment of the feast of the Heart of Jesus for the whole world, and because of the 200th anniversary of the apparitions given to St. Margaret Mary Alacoque. This last event was most influential for St. Joseph Sebastian, who notes in his autobiography, "June 16, 1875. The two hundredth anniversary of the revelation of the Heart of Jesus [...] was celebrated with solemn devotions during which I preached a homily. Since then, honor and love of the Divine Heart has increased in my soul." *

We are now observing the Year of Faith (2012-2013), and I have been asked to speak on the topic: *Witnesses of faith and love for the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus*. This topic relates to the celebration of the Year of Faith. When I first read this subject, there

arose in my mind a question of priority: faith or love...the love which God has for us, the sign of which is the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, or our love for Him, and our devotion to the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus?

Certainly, each of these topics deserves a separate treatment, broader than that which can be presented here. Since however, I assume that the organizers of this event desire a concise presentation, we will try to provide one, particularly as for St. Joseph Sebastian, they are interrelated. On the one hand, he emphasizes in many places, that faith without love is dead, and on the other, he expresses his conviction, based upon experience, that devotion to the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus is the most delightful means of reviving faith and intensifying love in the soul.

So let us begin with faith...

Today when we speak of faith, we are emphasizing its existential, personal dimension. For example, in No. 150 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church we read, "Faith is first of all a personal adherence of man to God, at the same time and inseparably, it is a free assent to the whole truth that God has revealed." We must remember that since St. Joseph Sebastian lived in a time when greater attention was paid to faith as it relates to the intellectual faculties, our author thus defines faith as "a personal reliance upon God; also, inseparable from this reliance, it is a free acknowledgement of the whole truth as revealed by God."

In his analysis of the relationship between faith and reason, St. Joseph Sebastian draws our attention to the need to have an intellectual grasp of the reasons behind what we believe, and also the substance of our belief. At the same time, he realistically adds that the study of theology is not necessarily for everyone since for many, particularly simple people, the reception of the Church's teaching, based on her authority, is sufficient. "One must remember," he adds, "that our acceptance and reception of revelation, as the primary act of faith, is not the result of evidence known by reason, but this comes from God, acting in the soul through grace that enlightens the intellect and inclines the will to submission."

On their part, the revealed truths are for our intellect, according to our Bishop of Przemyśl, invaluable helps, serving as signposts to religious truths, and authoritatively confirming what we could not arrive on its own. Certitude, given to the intellect by faith, does not mean that Revelation is a complete unveiling of the Divine mysteries; on the contrary, the Catholic religion contains within itself mysteries impossible for the human mind fully to grasp. The answers given by our religion are "half-light and half-dark". Our holy Bishop explains thus: "Spiritual truths are not altogether incomprehensible to the mind, as the words of an unknown language, but like the cloud which led the Israelites to the Promised Land, they possess a darkness, as well as a brightness...and yet, this darkness might well be the result of a light too dazzling for our human sight.

This "dark" side of Revelation should not cause the reason to reject it, since, on one hand, perfect knowledge of the mysteries of God, and the face-to-face vision of Him is

attained only in the eternal bliss of the saved; on the other hand, religion without mystery, in which all truths could be easily grasped by the finite mind, could be deemed a mere human invention. Thirdly, our author argues, even in the natural, visible world the inability of our mind to grasp a certain phenomenon in no way disproves its existence. In his fondness for images, Pelczar adds here a metaphor to illustrate the profit gained by the intellect when, enlightened by faith, it tries to understand truth beyond its own powers. “These mysteries are like mines of unfathomable depths: we cannot descend to their bottom, however if we go down carrying the lamp of faith, we can bring out treasures of wisdom.”

Regarding the apparent contradiction between truths of faith and those of reason or science, he points out that this could be a result of insufficient knowledge of the doctrinal principles of Christianity, even among learned people, errors in reasoning, or pride, which leads one to take one’s own opinions as irrefutable certainties. Another issue, which may, according to Pelczar, lead to difficulties, especially for the learned, is the simple way in which the faith is often presented, the “veil”, so to speak, under which its truths are often hidden.

This simplicity, however, should discourage no one, as we read in his book, Defense of the Catholic Religion, since this simplicity testifies to the wisdom and goodness of God, Who lowers Himself to all, even to the weakest. Moreover, it conceals within itself great treasures, which are inaccessible to the superficial observer, but revealed only to those who decide to enter into the world of faith. Explaining this, he uses the metaphor of the stained glass window, which seems dull from the outside, but captivating to those admiring it from within.

An important argument for the harmony between faith and reason is the testimony of the faith (or conversion) of people of science and culture, the long list of which Pelczar gives in his book, Apologetical Conferences, and also in his Defense of the Catholic Religion. Concluding his reflections with such examples, he reinforces his point with a warning: an image of the state of the soul which, rejecting any religion, weakens in itself the capacity for accepting truth, and easily falls into the abyss of despair.

Faith, though the gift of God, “a plant originating in the supernatural world, whose seed God places in the soul at baptism”, requires the cooperation of man, “the knowledge of the truths of the faith, submission to these truths, and living according to them”. The natural consequence of lack of such cooperation is the stunting or total loss of this divine gift. The most frequent causes of negligence or refusal to nurture the gift of faith are, according to Pelczar passions, ignorance, and laziness.

Placing passions in the first place is not accidental, since it is not right reason which causes loss of faith, as he writes, but rather the will, poisoned by egoism, pride, sensuality and laziness. “Religion is not some detached theory or philosophical system, but constitutes the law of life for individuals and society, and as such, penetrates the deepest secrets of man, embraces his whole essence, places on him obligations, requires submission of the mind, love from the heart, obedience of the will, teaches mortification,

condemns evil thoughts, and commands love of enemies. Man, however, does not like humiliation, detests a yoke, dislikes self-discipline, willingly indulges in laziness, and is guided by selfishness. If he follows these inclinations, he will oppose religion, considering it as shackles on his spirit, and an attack upon his freedom.”

...

According to the Holy Bishop, among the passions which seduce one from faith, the most prevalent is pride, which allows one to believe in one’s infallibility, and to reject what one’s mind and passions cannot grasp.

The person who looks even among unbelievers for those of good will may rightly ask for the rationale for such an evaluation of the motives for loss of faith. The simplest answer, one which arises almost spontaneously, is that St. Joseph Sebastian Pelczar is taking moral aim at discrediting unbelievers. It seems, however, that such an explanation would be at best incomplete. The text we are considering suggests his approach was above all, primarily intended to demonstrate the falsehood of the reasoning that unbelief would be the result of thorough education or deep thought. On the contrary, the Bishop of Przemysl points out that after the passions, the primary cause of loss of faith is not knowledge of the world, but “lack of knowledge of the things of God.”

Ignorance, about which we speak here, has a fundamental character. It does not refer only to a particular truth of the faith, but to Christ Himself, Who, as we read in the introduction to The Spiritual Life, is, to the Christian, in a sense, the God Who was “the unknown god” of the Athenians.

Since this is true, those for whom Jesus Christ is not “the unknown god” should do all in their power to deepen this knowledge, this union with Him, and to bring others to Him. An excellent means to this, according to our holy Bishop, is devotion to the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus.

St. Joseph Sebastian Pelczar was not only himself a devotee of the Heart of Jesus, but also a promoter of this devotion; thus we find many references to it in his literary legacy. A fuller view of his understanding of the devotion we can find in a small but textually rich book entitled: The Devotion to the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus According to the Apparitions Given to St. Margaret Mary and Biography of the Saint (Przemysl, 1921). Published at the end of the author’s life, it is a compilation of his thought at that time on this subject. In this presentation, time constrains us to treat of this work, not exhaustively, but in summary.

In his meditations on the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, the holy Bishop begins with an explanation of the symbolism of the heart itself, and the Heart of Jesus in particular. Speaking of the heart in general, he voices the belief that it is the symbol of the entire affective sphere of the human being. Referring to the Holy Scripture, he adds that this means not only fleeting emotions, but those which move the will, stimulating it to concrete and specific action. With this sense, he writes that the heart is “the furnace of

passions and desires”, “the source of motivation and action”, which St. Paul referred to as “the spiritual man”. Therefore, for St. Joseph Sebastian, the term, “Heart of Jesus” means not only the bodily heart, but also the spiritual heart, that is, the dwelling of His feelings, and especially the emblem of His Infinite Love, and all the desires and aspirations, virtues, actions and the deeds which flowed from His Love.”

This spiritual Heart, in other words, the love of God, is the primary goal of acts of worship directed to the Heart of Jesus. And because there is no other way to adore love than to receive and reciprocate it, the essence of devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus is seeking ways to do this in one’s own life, and desiring that others do the same, or if they will not, to express love for God in their name, especially through the acceptance of His great gift, so often disregarded and neglected, namely, the Eucharist.

Reflecting in turn on the historical context of the revelation of the love of God, Pelczar uses the allegory the sun, which rising does not immediately show itself to our eyes, but first announces its arrival with the dawn, and later gradually enlightens the world with its rays, beginning with mountains and hills, and ending with valleys. “Similarly, Jesus Christ...revealed the mysteries of His Heart gradually...illuminating...the highest peaks which are the saints and chosen souls, before letting their light descend to ordinary Christians through St. Margaret Mary.”

Indicating the biblical source of this devotion of which we speak, the holy bishop encourages the contemplation of the love of God, revealed in the whole earthly life of the Son of God. According to Pelczar, we can discover this love in every event of the life of Jesus, even in those seemingly not related to us, such as the flight into Egypt, in which he sees the desire of the Son of God to bring consolation to the persecuted, exiled and homeless. We need only delve into the Evangelical text in meditation, and we undoubtedly will discover therein, “immeasurable depths of love, of which the Source is the Heart of Jesus.”

With this in mind, we need to emphasize the special weight our author attaches to those moments in the life of Jesus which he names the monuments of His Love: the Manger, the Cross, and the Most Blessed Sacrament.

Thus, in the Manger, the symbol of the mystery of the Incarnation, St. Joseph Sebastian sees above all the abasement of the Son of God, Who comes “as a crying infant to wipe away our human tears,” to offer each moment of His earthly life as an act of “homage, satisfaction, and sacrifice to the Father, and devotion to man.”

Furthermore, the suffering and death of Jesus Christ, according to Pelczar, we must look at not so much from the point of view of the sufferings undergone for us, but in view of the contrast between the love of God and our own love. “Who is it for whom God dies? Are they His friends, from whom He can expect some gift, or at least great gratitude? On the contrary, they are miserable creatures whom God called from nothingness, who have received everything from God, and thus are incapable of giving Him anything. Moreover, they are His enemies, insolent rebels who have trampled His law underfoot, rejected his yoke, and in arrogant anger desired to throw Him from His throne, crying,

“You shall not rule over us!” They are ingrates who despite His love, spurn Him, revile His Cross, reject His salvation, and run blindly into the abyss of perdition...don't be surprised that the saints, at the sight of the Cross, sometimes cried out, ‘Lord, You are truly mad that with such love You have loved us, who are so wicked!’”

Although the work of salvation would have been possible without the suffering of the Cross, the dynamic of love consists in that “the more one loves someone, the more he desires to suffer for that one.” Also, the Cross gives the full image of God's love, wisdom, holiness, and justice, as well as the gravity of our sins. Thus, as St. Joseph Sebastian observes, although even one drop of blood, one sigh, would have been enough for our redemption, the Son of God desired to accept the Cross, “so that man would from now on, have no excuse but be impelled to love God, Who so loved the world...”

But this is not all, the Bishop of Przemyśl emphatically tells us. Even in the glory of heaven, Jesus Christ has never ceased to think of us, “Because His Heart has never abandoned Its love for us; also in heaven the Lord Jesus belongs to us completely.”

The summit of the loving devotion of the Son of God to all of us, according to St. Joseph Sebastian Pelczar, is the Eucharist, which is a sign, not only of His great humility for love of us, but also of His desire for uniting Himself with us, strengthening us, and transforming us into Himself. It is here, he adds, where the Heart of our Priest, our Friend, and our Father, is present, beating with ineffable love.

Knowledge of God's love gives birth to the need to respond to it. This need is so urgent, yet many fail to answer with love, or remain indifferent to it. The question arises: how should we respond...how ought we worthily to receive such a boundless gift? St. Joseph Sebastian Pelczar gives advice both simple and demanding...first, by keeping His commandments and avoiding sin; next by acceptance of His Will, even in difficult situations- “Whoever loves God only in happy moments, does not love Him truly”, thirdly, by fervent prayer and gratitude for gifts received and good use of them, as well as loving everything that is dear to the Divine Heart. The expression of our love to the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus consists ultimately in seeking in all things the glory of God, and in eager work to extend it on earth, using all possible means that the Kingdom of the Heart of Jesus, that is a kingdom of truth and love, would be established in all souls.

True love toward the Heart of Jesus, as Pelczar emphasizes, does not depend upon external devotional practices, nor upon beautiful words, but upon forming our heart after the example of the Heart of Jesus, thus, upon total offering of ourselves to God, care for the glory of God and not our own consolation and profit, as well as sincere and persevering love of neighbor.

Let us pause for a moment on this total devotion to God, since Pelczar sees in it the primary and fundamental act of the Heart of Jesus. “Consecration to the Heavenly Father, total offering without reservation, without bounds...commitment to perfect fulfillment of the Will of the Father, which was the redemption of man...in this way, the Lord Jesus acknowledged that He does not exist for Himself, that He desires nothing for Himself, but

lives only to offer Himself as a total holocaust for the glory of God and the salvation of souls.”

From this act of offering came everything: all His desires, words, and actions. This offering comes directly from love; it is identified with it, since, as our Saint says, “love is impossible without offering of oneself”

It is worth noting that for St. Joseph Sebastian Pelczar, there can be no talk of true devotion to the Heart of Jesus where apostolic spirit is absent. Whoever truly loves the Lord Jesus also “shares His desires and works according to his strength that they might be realized.” As there is no heat without fire, so lack of zeal for God’s glory and the salvation of all, indicates that despite lofty feelings and words, authentic devotion is lacking. Of course, the forms of apostolate may vary, depending upon one’s state of life, vocation, and individual disposition, but one thing is essential: the true apostle of the Heart of Jesus “does as much good as possible in everything, and in everything he does, seeks God’s glory, and not his own glorification and profit...is sacrificial, determined, and zealous.”

To achieve our aim, we must return constantly to the source. The apostle of the Heart of Jesus must know Jesus “not only superficially, but intimately” meaning not only “looking at His deeds, but also knowing His Heart, that is, His feelings, desires, and intentions, and compare his own heart to the Heart of Jesus...in order to take upon himself His Heart.” If this is not done, his apostolate will be only self-proclamation and the seeking of his own glory.

Let me close with the words of St. Joseph Sebastian addressed to his friend, Fr. Karol Krementowski. “There is no greater happiness than to be the subject of this Most Loving Heart. With this love, all the struggles and sorrows of life we count as nothing, because this love is everything to us: our strength, our consolation, and our glory; with it labor becomes rest, bitterness- sweetness, earth- heaven.”

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*Cf C. Niezgoda, *Wierny Idealom*, Krakow 1988, p.257-261.