



TO

Living the
Nine First
Fridays

Sr. Anne Flanagan, FSP

Come
TO
See



Come
TO
Me



Come TO Me

Living the Nine First Fridays

by Sister Anne Flanagan, FSP



Nibil Obstat: Reverend Joseph Briody, S.S.L., S.T.D.

Imprimatur: ✠ Seán P. Cardinal O'Malley, O.F.M. Cap.
Archbishop of Boston
February 24, 2023

Library of Congress Control Number: 2023931436

CIP data is available.

ISBN 10: 0-8198-1690-6

ISBN 13: 978-0-8198-1690-0

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Published by Pauline Books & Media, 50 Saint Pauls Avenue, Boston, MA 02130-3491

Printed in Korea.

www.pauline.org

Pauline Books & Media is the publishing house of the Daughters of St. Paul, an international congregation of women religious serving the Church with the communications media.

*In memory of my godmother, Irma Marie Stiegler,
who first taught me the secret of the Nine First Fridays.*

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Foreword

DEVOTION TO THE SACRED HEART of Jesus can change your life.

I grew up in a time when very few people spoke about devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. I suspect that back then some Catholics felt it was old-fashioned and overly pietistic—that it led only to a privatized spirituality. And I suppose some Catholics practiced the devotion that way.

But my experience was quite different. My parents, especially my mother, passed on to us kids a lively devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. I recognized it as an expression of God's great love for us, even though I wasn't always convinced of God's love for me. I was dumbfounded when I first read some of Jesus' words to Saint Margaret Mary Alacoque—the saint who popularized the devotion after receiving apparitions of Jesus. Words such as:

My Divine Heart is so passionately in love with humanity that it can no longer contain within itself the flames of its ardent charity.¹

and

Behold this Heart which has so loved people that it has spared nothing, even to exhausting and consuming itself, in order to testify to its love. In return, I receive . . . only ingratitude, by their irreverence and sacrilege.²

At first, I couldn't believe that those words were meant for *me*. Jesus couldn't love *me* like that: I wasn't good enough. Margaret Mary was a saint: of course, Jesus meant those words for her. But looking deeper, and praying with Jesus' words to Saint Margaret Mary, I realized that Christ's words to her were like his words in the Gospel, and as true for me as they were for the apostles:

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you (Jn 15:9).

No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends (Jn 15:13).

Devotion to the Sacred Heart opened the door for me to enter into a personal relationship with Christ. Recognizing Christ's love for me also gave me the courage—despite my shyness, insecurity, and timidity—to begin following my vocation to religious life.



If you are looking for a way to discover or deepen your personal relationship with God, you can find few ways more captivating than focusing on the Sacred Heart of Jesus. *Come to Me: Living the Nine First Fridays* is the perfect companion for

growing in your relationship with Christ. This little book will take you beyond the simple practice requested by Jesus to Saint Margaret Mary of going to Mass and receiving Communion on nine consecutive First Fridays of the month. Author Sister Anne Flanagan—a beloved and deeply spiritual sister in my community—will not only help you explore what it means to understand and receive Christ’s great love for us. She will also guide you into responding to *his* Heart with a full and very personal response from *your* heart.

Come to Me does this in a beautifully integrated and simple way. Part One introduces devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and all the elements that make up the devotional practice of the Nine First Fridays, including its connection to Eucharistic adoration and reparation, and the transformative approach this book offers. Part Two offers concrete guidance for a particular way of making the Nine First Fridays with:

- a monthly reflection on a particular attribute of the heart for your spiritual growth,
- the example of a saintly witness to accompany you through the month,
- a guide for a holy hour of Eucharistic adoration that truly engages you—mind, will, and heart—in an encounter with Christ that will shape your life and relationships.

Part Three offers even more by providing a tool for you to “review” the past nine months and its spiritual takeaways for your life, as well as an in-depth look at the devotion’s Scriptural

and historical foundations. Finally, the Treasury of Prayers offers a small but unique collection that can help you to contemplate and praise God's great love for each of us in Christ.

Simply put, you hold a treasure in your hands. *Come to Me* is the fruit of the author's countless hours of prayer and a life dedicated to sharing the Gospel with the world. Her profound insights and eloquent description of the love of Christ and the relationship to which Jesus calls us will benefit those discovering devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus for the first time as well as persons in search of a resource to deepen their devotion. My prayer for each of you is that this book will bring you closer to Christ's Heart.

God bless you.

Sister Marie Paul Curley, FSP

Author, *Soul of Christ: Meditations on a Timeless Prayer*



PART I

AN INVITATION

Come to Me

“COME TO ME, ALL YOU that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest” (Mt 11:28).

This warm invitation comes from *the Sacred Heart of Jesus*, the most vivid possible symbol of God’s passionate love for humanity.

Who of us has not felt at one time or other, in one way or other, weary or heavy burdened? Who has not longed to cast away burdens and cares in the presence of Someone who understands what is happening, not just in terms of external pressures and problems, but deep within our being? Who has not wanted to hear a trusted friend say, “Come here. Come to me, just as you are?”

It’s not just wishful thinking. There *is* a Heart that calls to each of us with love beyond our imagining.

Out of love for each of us, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, “God from God, Light from Light, True God from True God,” was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary and became man. Just twenty days after that event, muscle cells in the embryo’s cardiac crescent began their rhythmic pulse. Except

for a span of three days during Passover time some thirty-three years later, that Heart has never stopped beating.

It is a Heart moved to pity for the masses: “I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat” (Mk 8:2).

It is a Heart that can read—and be grieved by—people’s innermost thoughts and judgments (see Mk 3:5).

It is the pierced Heart of a man who for us “suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.”

It is the Heart from which the life-giving grace of the Holy Spirit unceasingly flows over the world.

It is the human heart of a divine Person.

It is beating now, as he sits at the right hand of the Father.

It is the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus

Devotion to the Sacred Heart honors Jesus, the Son of God and our loving Redeemer, under the symbol of his Heart, which represents God’s immense love for humanity. It is a devotion that is all about love—Jesus’ intense love for us, and our response of love to him in return. Devotion to the Sacred Heart is a solid foundation for our life of prayer.

The traditional devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus as we know it is especially linked with Saint Margaret Mary Alacoque (for more of her story see page 233). Beginning in 1673, this French Visitation nun experienced a series of apparitions, visits from the risen Jesus. He progressively manifested his Sacred

Heart to her and made known his desire to be approached with trust and even a certain kind of compassion. Pointing to his own Heart, visible to her eyes as a fiery furnace, he said, “Behold this Heart which has so greatly loved human beings and has received so little love in return!”

During his apparitions to Saint Margaret Mary, Jesus promised blessings (the promises of the Sacred Heart), specifying particular grace for those who would participate in Mass and receive Holy Communion on the First Friday of the month for *nine consecutive months*.

Let these encouraging promises from the Heart of Jesus open your heart to all the grace that the Lord has in store for you over these coming First Fridays.

The Twelve Promises of the Sacred Heart

1. I will give them all of the graces necessary for their state of life.

The “state in life” is a person’s fundamental life calling (vocation): priesthood, religious consecration, marriage, single state.

2. I will establish peace in their houses.

Jesus himself told the disciples when he first sent them out to preach, “Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace to this house!’” (Lk 10:5)

3. I will comfort them in all their afflictions.

In the Gospel of John, the Holy Spirit is called the “Comforter.” The Holy Spirit is also specifically linked with the

Heart of the Savior in John 7:37–39, when Jesus promises that rivers of living water would come from his Heart.

4. I will be their strength during life and above all at the point of death.

These words recall those of the Hail Mary: “now and at the hour of our death.” The hour of our death is a pivotal moment of our life! The theme of a happy death will return in the final promise.

5. I will bestow abundant blessings upon all their undertakings.

*This promise echoes Psalm 90 and its prayer:
“Prosper for us the work of our hands—
O prosper the work of our hands!” (Ps 90:17)*

6. Sinners shall find in my Heart the source and the infinite ocean of mercy.

We find the expression “ocean of mercy” in the 20th century revelations of the Divine Mercy to Saint Faustina. “Sinners” are all of us, to the extent that we cling to what draws us away from God, who is our life.

7. Tepid souls shall grow fervent.

What is more painful to a loving heart than the response of someone who couldn’t care less? The indifferent are unlikely to share their faith with others or go out of their way to meet someone else’s need. Jesus promises to reawaken these half-hearted disciples.

8. Fervent souls shall quickly mount to high perfection.

Perfection here does not mean flawlessness—much less correspondence to any changeable, popular ideal notion! It refers to unbounded charity: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt 5:48).

9. I will bless every place where a picture of my Heart shall be set up and honored.

We are a union of body and soul. Like everything else that we do as human beings, the devotion to the Sacred Heart also involves our body with its senses. See page 261 for an explanation of the Enthronement of the Sacred Heart in the home.

10. I will give to priests the gift of touching the most hardened hearts.

How many hearts are hardened because of pain! This promise suggests that the priest who lives in communion with the Sacred Heart of Jesus will be granted, even without his being aware of it, the words or insights that can bring an offer of healing from God (“who searches the heart,” according to Rom 8:27).

11. Those who shall promote this devotion shall have their names written in my Heart, never to be blotted out.

Speaking on behalf of God, the prophet Isaiah said that the people would be “inscribed . . . on the palms of my hands” (Isa 49:16) as an expression of God’s steadfast love. For our part, to promote devotion to the Sacred

Heart is to encourage people to appreciate being loved by God!

12. I promise you in the excessive mercy of my Heart that my all-powerful love will grant to all those who shall receive Holy Communion on the First Friday in nine consecutive months the grace of final penitence; they shall not die in my disgrace nor without receiving their sacraments; my Divine Heart shall be their safe refuge in this last moment.

The practice of the Nine First Fridays is based on this promise. It brings us face to face with the moment of death, which can come at any time. With this promise, Jesus tells us that frequent Mass and Communion will enable us to live in such a way that the moment of death will be the beginning of our eternal communion with God in the fullness of life. For those who persevere in goodwill, making the Nine First Fridays is training in a holy way of life. If we fall through weakness, God in his faithfulness promises us the means of regaining the life of grace through the sacraments.

Behold This Heart

What is a heart? A doctor will give one answer, a poet another, and a fiancé still another. When we refer to the heart, we often mean more than a physical organ like the brain or the liver that carries out a really important (vital!) function. Instead,

the heart represents the whole person, just as the physical organ has a clear and direct connection with the whole body. Even a cardiologist's spouse expects a Valentine's Day card to feature a stylized heart or two!

Images of the Sacred Heart of Jesus are much more than a simple valentine-type image. This Heart is bursting with *flames*, surmounted by a *cross*, wrapped in a *crown of thorns*, and slashed with an open *wound*. All of these visual elements send us back to that pivotal event in history when Jesus Christ freely gave his life for us "to take it up again" (Jn 10:18). The Sacred Heart of Jesus is *Jesus himself* in his love, which is tender (it's a *heart!*), vulnerable (wounded), and vehement (flames). This is the Jesus who was "crucified under Pontius Pilate," and whose death was verified by a Roman spear thrust so violently between the ribs that "at once blood and water came out" (Jn 19:34), as testified by an eyewitness. This is not a dreamy, imaginative devotion, but one rooted in historic fact.

The symbols of the Sacred Heart also take us back to the Bible: the fire, representing Christ's ardent love, but also like the burning bush from which God revealed his mercy toward the suffering people (see Ex 3); the crown of thorns, a direct reference to the passion of Christ, mocked as "King of the Jews"; the wound from the soldier's lance; the cross at the summit. (For a fuller explanation of the scriptural foundation for the devotion to the Sacred Heart, see page 223.)



Any of the great themes associated with devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus could be a “master key” for reading the Bible, approaching the catechism, or entering decisively into a life of prayer:

- God’s overflowing mercy;
- the sheer goodness of God, who goes in search of the lost;
- the free offer of grace;
- the ardent God, who awakens the heart of the one he cherishes;
- the Good Shepherd, who will stop at nothing to rescue the endangered sheep;
- the promise of life in abundance;
- the self-emptying and glorification of the Son of God, the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world.

His Eucharistic Heart

The Sacred Heart of Jesus is a *Eucharistic* Heart. This is the meek and humble Heart of Jesus at the Last Supper, washing feet in self-giving service and voicing the same command we hear at Mass: “Do this.”

It is the Heart on which John rested, a Heart of intense desire to share his supper with you and me. (“With desire I have desired” is how the older translations render Luke 22:15.)

John tells us: “Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go

to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end” (Jn 13:1). This is the Heart whose love for his own led him to give his Body and Blood as the now definitive Covenant between heaven and earth—and to give us a way of repeatedly receiving and committing to that Covenant until the end of time through sacramental signs of bread and wine.

The apparitions of Jesus to Saint Margaret Mary rendered the connection between the Eucharist and the Heart of Christ most explicit in Christ’s directive to prepare for First Friday Holy Communion with nighttime Eucharistic adoration.

The Mass draws people together; *it unites the body of Christ* visibly in a powerful sign that my relationship with Jesus is not a closed circle. With all the others who hear the same Word of God and receive the same Bread of Life, each of us is like a branch grafted onto a living vine. The Mass is our participation in the worship that Christ, as the Lamb who was slain, offers the Father (see Rev 13:8). The love for the Father and for us that brought Jesus to the cross remains alive in his Heart in the Eucharist. The length and breadth and height and depth of that love can become visible all over the whole world through the members of his body.

Because the Eucharist does not revert to bread and wine after Mass, from the early centuries of Christianity the Blessed Sacrament has been reserved in protected vessels to be carried to the sick and dying. Church documents on the liturgy remind us of this. The Church’s faith is clear: the Eucharist is the Risen Christ himself, whole and entire, not simply a convenient and commonly accepted symbol. When this truth was threatened in

the early Middle Ages, saints and other holy souls were stirred to Eucharistic *adoration*.

Numerous Eucharistic miracles have been reported, some of which, like the miracle of Lanciano, have perdured for centuries. These were cataloged in a database by the teenaged Blessed, Carlo Acutis. Some Eucharistic miracles have even been scientifically investigated. No matter the time or place involved, under a microscope the results have been the same: whenever a consecrated Host has miraculously changed its form to obviously become flesh, that flesh has manifested itself as heart tissue. *Fully present* in the Eucharist (Body, Blood, soul and divinity), Christ speaks to us through science, the language our age knows best: *“Behold this Heart!”*

From Mass to Eucharistic Adoration

People who enter my community’s chapel (or any other Pauline chapel) for the first time are often surprised to find a message on the wall, usually near the tabernacle. It sounds vaguely biblical, but since no Scripture citation is given, one’s attention is drawn more and more to the Eucharistic context: “Do not be afraid; I am with you. From here I want to enlighten. Have a penitent heart.” It can only be Jesus speaking, as he so often did during his public ministry.

It was Blessed James Alberione (1884–1971), an Italian priest and religious founder, who first received that Eucharistic exhortation. As he later explained it, writing in the third person: “The words came from the tabernacle, and with vigor, to make

him [Alberione] understand that all light is to be received from him, from the Master.”³ In the Eucharist, Jesus is teaching, guiding, inviting, consoling, commissioning new apostles. He is always the Master, the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

For Father Alberione, the Hour of Eucharistic Adoration was a continuation or prolongation of the Mass. He felt that the most complete way to make an Hour of Adoration was by honoring Jesus as Way, Truth, and Life, and the prayer guides in this book follow his recommendation:

Jesus as *Truth* is the fullness of revelation, his words and deeds showing us the Father. *Putting on the mind of Christ our Truth*, we encounter the Truth of God in our prayer, especially through reading the Bible, particularly the Gospel.

Jesus as *Way* is not only an example to imitate, not only the route to God: Jesus takes us into himself and brings us into communion with the Father! *Walking in the footsteps of Jesus our Way*, we “read” our own life in the light of the Word of God, letting the Word call us to renewed conversion and ongoing transformation. The Holy Spirit does the rest, bringing our thoughts, our values, our priorities—everything!—into line with those of Jesus. We still live our human life, but more and more, Christ truly lives in us.

Jesus as *Life* is the Giver of the Spirit in whom we live, the Spirit of the resurrection who is the promise of our own eternal life in God. *Dwelling in the Heart of Jesus our Life*, we confidently ask for the grace we need, and we rejoice that we share this divine life even now. Our praise, begun here on earth, will continue in heaven.