

# 1- Our God loves us

Father Jules Chevalier was born in 1824 at a difficult and troubled time. In his childhood he lived through an era filled with memories of the revolution and Napoleonic Wars. The country areas were full of misery. Instruction was rare. The faith seemed to have disappeared. It is the time of Cure D'Ars who used to say "Leave a parish twenty years without a priest and they will worship the animals."

Little by little, however, the seminaries began to open again, religion appears again. But there was so much to do. The Cure D'Ars was the most outstanding model of a great number of 'small priests'- very poor and very zealous - who had an extraordinary desire to try to help the parishes. What they preached was penitence; God had punished us for our sins so we must return to Him. Pilgrimages increased in number, penitential ceremonies are the order of the day. Preachers are severe, confessionals are besieged. It is this atmosphere that Fr. Chevalier, having entered the seminary very late because of poverty of his family, pursues his religious formation. He is very austere, very serious, very preoccupied by the de-Christianisation around him.

Meanwhile he asks himself questions - He will soon be a priest, the task seems to him to be beyond human strength. So many saintly priests have tried to 'restore' the church over the past fifty years and the result is so disappointing! It is then in the normal course of his seminary studies, a lecturer introduces a course on the Sacred Heart. For Jules Chevalier it is a shock, an eye opener. There it is! The means!..... the true, the good, the easy means. No longer is it necessary to say to people 'Be converted or else feel the anger of God.' Now the cry is 'God loves you'.

It is difficult for us to understand the upheaval this caused in the heart of Jules Chevalier. Today we live at time when preachers no longer speak of the severity of God nor of hell. On the contrary we often hear mention of solidarity and tolerance.....Since our childhood we have become accustomed to the recommendation 'Let us love one another.' For us to be a Christian is before all. And with that we think we have understood. But what Jules Chevalier discovered was that he had had a lightening revelation - not this refined love - but a passionate love. God loves us passionately. Religion is not a matter of religious practices, not a matter of customs, nor of good works but of **LOVE** i.e. being bound up with God who loves us 'To live from love'. As Therese of Lisieux, a few years later will also say.

Whatever era we live in, whatever the difficulties we meet with, whatever the advantages we have, the question put to each one of us is always the same: "Do you love me?" Without love there is no human life which is worth the trouble of living it. All human loves are nothing but reflections of the love of God. God is

love itself. To be chosen to us God has taken flesh of a Man. "The Sacred Heart" That's it, God has a heart like ours, he loves us in the way a man loves but with the power of the love of God.....

That is going to be the "Grande Passion" of Fr Chevalier, one which, moreover, is going to fill his life; a passion to make known to everyone, everywhere that God loves us.

## ***2- The centre to which all converges***

What one sometimes calls "Devotion to the Sacred Heart", for Fr Chevalier was not one devotion amidst a multitude of others. For him it was the quintessence of Christianity, the very centre to which all converges, the centre-point of everything, embracing all and responding to all. Here is the admirable text (1862) in which he gives best expression to his conviction :

*"The Heart of the Divine Master is the centre to which all converges in the Old and New Testament, the pivot on which everything turns in Catholicism, the sunshine of the catholic church, the source of our mysteries, the pledge of our reconciliation, the salvation of the world, the remedy of all our ills, the defence of the Christian. It is thus that I understand devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus : it embraces everything and has an answer to everything."*

It is the reason one regards Fr Chevalier as a founder who is completely original. All religious orders, like the congregations have been founded to help their members live in a way more perfect in the imitation of Christ. But as one cannot perfectly imitate Christ in everything, each founder has wished to choose especially one of the aspects of Christ living among men. Jesus taught; so there will be orders of preachers or teachers. Jesus was poor; so there are mendicant orders Jesus healed; so there are orders of those who care for the sick and needy. Jesus was a man of prayer; that is why there are contemplative orders etc. But Fr Chevalier wanted the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart in every walk of life.

- *Our name indicates what we are. The name of "Missionary of the Sacred Heart" means apostle of the Sacred Heart. This title then fits the rector or curate, the chaplain, the teacher, in one word it fits every level in the society".*
- *"In order that the Sacred Heart of Jesus may be everywhere loved the society takes on all kinds of ministry that the Church is able to offer without a single exception."*
- *"We will always be ready according to our means to fulfil all sorts of Mission wherever they may be."*



In this it is astonishing to recognise the agreement between Fr Chevalier and St Therese of Lisieux Dr of the Church. They did not know each other but they were contemporaries, both recognising the same needs of the Church in their time. Therese who ,still a child, did not know how to choose, but would 'take all,' had found in Carmel her real and particular vocation; she wanted to be at the heart of the Church. 'In the Heart of the Church, (my Mother) I will be LOVE.....' She has been so well understood that she, the little contemplative religious cut off from the world from the age of fifteen, has been proclaimed patroness of the Missions for the Universal Church.

'May the Heart of Jesus be everywhere loved.....' That is the motto which Fr Chevalier has left us. But, in his writings implications often come up; by everybody for everybody and by every means.

### **3- "The remedy for all our ills "**

This is the phrase Fr Chevalier used to use when speaking of the Sacred Heart. The ills or evils of his time were atheism, materialism, nationalism, liberalism, and Jansenism..... all that , for him , cut off from God or withdrew from God. But when he wanted to summarize his thoughts he said only.....

Indifference and egotism (selfishness) are also evils of our time—the evils of all time—since the first man. Indifference is refusing to accept that God loves us. One can believe oneself to be Christian and still be "indifferent" in that sense. How often do these people make a list of principles to which they cling honestly and which give them a good conscience

You often see in the case of divorce, one or other parties declares "I don't see what he (or she ) has got to reproach me with - I've always done what I ought to do ". But it is not a matter of duty or obligation—It is a matter of **LOVE**. Without love there is no real union. Without love there is no "religion" - this word which Fr Chevalier was fond of, because he would use it in its deep / profound meaning i.e. that which binds us or attaches us to God. *"Though I should give away to the poor all that I possess, and even give up my body to be burned - if I am without love, it will do me no good whatever,"* said St Paul. (1. Cor. 13.3.)

Egotism or selfishness is all that is contrary to love . It is enough to list exactly St Paul's " Hymn to love" to grasp how selfishness (or self love ) is precisely love's negative! *" Love is always patient and kind; love is never jealous; love is not boastful or conceited, it is never rude and never seeks its own advantage, it does not take offence or store up grievances. Love does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but finds its joy in the truth. It is always ready to make allowances, to trust, to hope and to endure whatever comes,. Love never comes to an end."* (1. Cor. 13, 4-8 ).

Jesus came to reveal to us that God is LOVE and TENDERNESS. Fr Chevalier wanted to help people to believe in the tender love of God, to give grounds for hope, to bring them out of the pessimistic view or vision of the world, and to set them free by a look of love and tenderness for God and man.

The Gospels speak to us of the deep relationship between Jesus and his Father, so much so that as Son he lived off this relationship which marked his whole life. **ABBA FATHER**, In Luke (10, 21) we read : "*Just at this time, filled with joy by the Holy Spirit, he said " I bless you, Father Lord of heaven and of earth for hiding these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them to little children"*.

In the letter to the Hebrews we find a passage which throws light on this relationship. "*Christ, on coming into the world said you wanted no sacrifice or oblation but you gave me a body. You took no pleasure in burnt offering or sacrifice for sin; then I said "Here I am - I come to do you will"*. (Heb. 10-5-7).

This deep conviction - this total confidence in His Father gives him an extraordinary freedom and security in all his actions. Starting from his personal experience of God, he underlines the goodness and the mercy of his Father: "*If you then being evil know how to give good things to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him"* (Marc 1, 15).

(Of also the parable of the Prodigal Son which portrays the Forgiving Father)  
(Lc15 1-32)

Father Chevalier was seized (grabbed) by this love of God. In **Jesus** he sees the true witness to this love, who has come to reveal this "Union" (of Father & Son) in God so that we can make our way into it too. He deserves that all people share in this Divine Life. "*I - I have come that you may have life and may have it more abundantly - in all its fullness"*. (John 10.10).

## ***4- Our Lady of the Sacred Heart***

Father Chevalier had a great love of Mary. He was living in an age or a century which may be described as MARIAN , (the nineteenth century saw the Rue de Bac (1846), La Salette (1846), Lourdes (1858) Pontinain (1871) Pellevoisin (1876) but he did not want to have a particular devotion to our Lady e.g. (to Mary Immaculate, Mary the Mother of God, the Mother of Dolours etc.). Just as in speaking of the Sacred Heart he wanted to say everything of Jesus—of the love of God made flesh, likewise he was trying to find a title that would say everything of Mary.



In 1857 he handed to his fellow members the name or title "Our Lady of the Sacred Heart."

The preposition "of" in French, is able to describe either the origin or the destination (for example: The Paris Train is maybe the train going in the direction of Paris or the train coming from Paris). For Father Chevalier the two implications are to be found in the title of "Our Lady of the Sacred Heart." Moreover whatever representations there are of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart - the images always show the double gesture: Mary pointing us to the Heart of Jesus, Jesus showing us his Mother.

Father Chevalier used to support this title of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart drawing on these two passages of the Gospel:-

1. The Wedding Feast at Cana ( Mary marks out her son saying : "Do whatever he tells you").
2. Mary at the foot of the cross (when Jesus said "This is your Mother "). But these two statements are found in the Gospel of St. John: And these are the only two occasions when John speaks of Mary.

The Gospel of John is the latest of the four Gospels. John did not want to go back over the happenings relative to Mary which are found in the three other Gospels – more to give true value to what seemed to him essential -- one discovers there the wish of Father Chevalier : to say everything of Mary in speaking the essential. These two happenings which perforce "frame" the Gospel story (since one is found almost at the beginning and the other at the end) bring it about that the whole Gospel message hangs within the very title of "Our Lady of the Sacred Heart".

This is what we express in the prayer of the brotherhood –"the Memorare" where we love to say *"Lead all men to the source of living water which gushes from his Heart"* and *"Make us live as you do in the love of your Son"*.

The crowds came running in large numbers. Parish Priests and Religious (especially the Jesuits) knew how to speak ardently of Our Lady under this title which reduced everything to basic. Numerous bishops encouraged pilgrimages and places of devotion. Finally Pope Pius IX gave orders that the statue of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart at Issoudun should be crowned in his name (The Popes). There was a splendid celebration which lasted two weeks: 30,000 pilgrims, 700 priests (who heard confessions "day and night" ) and 30 Bishops. It took place on the eighth of September 1869 six years after the time that Father Chevalier had publicly proclaimed the title "Our Lady of the Sacred Heart".

Father Chevalier , apostle of the Essential..... In speaking of the Sacred Heart, wanted to say everything of the love of God. Then why has he, under the title of "Our Lady of the Sacred Heart" made this extremely important place/position for

Mary? But to give this title to Mary was not only to say everything of Mary, it was also to say everything of the God of Love. Just as in front of the work of art of a painter or a sculptor one says:-- "It is the whole of Raphael, or the whole of Fra Angelico which is in this work".

## ***5- The three branches***

"May the heart of Jesus be everywhere loved"...By all, for all and in every possible way. (c f p.2 : The Centre to which all converges).

Just as Father Chevalier did not want to limit his work to the imitation of a single aspect of the life and personality of Jesus, but wished rather to proclaim all of him in describing all of his love—in the same way our founder could not restrict himself to the usual structures of an ordinary Congregation. It was his wish, certainly, to found a family of religious men (religious women will come some years later)—but he also wished to associate with his work every "state of life"---secular priests and laymen. ALL those who were keen to commit themselves to his group should be priests attached to a diocese, lay people men or women, married or living simply as part of a family---that all from the beginning of the Congregation carried officially the name of "Missionaries of the Sacred Heart".

When Father Chevalier wanted to have the Constitutions of his Congregation officially approved by Rome the officials were a bit scared. They recalled that a Congregation was by definition made up of religious who had taken the three and were dependent on a community. Father Chevalier to his great regret was obliged to submit to this judicial decision otherwise his congregation would not be able to be recognised. The secular priests and the laity were declared to be merely "associates", relating simply to some "works", to some "third orders", of the Congregation.

In our time, the experience of the "New Communities" shows us that Father Chevalier has been a Visionary and one ahead of his time.

We can be sorry that the circumstances of history have not allowed the lay people to be "on the same footing" as the religious men and women (i. e. fully part of the family, as by right). But that is a purely judicial outcome. While respecting the law one cannot forget what was in practice our beginnings and the desire of our founder.

There are other examples in the history of the Church where Founders came to hurl themselves at (or against) the "law" of the age in which they found themselves. In 1610 St Francis de Salles wanted to found the "Visitandines" to visit the poor, he was told that according to the rule or law of the time religious



women were necessarily cloistered and cut off from the world With great regret St Francis de Salles was obliged bow to this demand. When thirty years later St Vincent de Paul wanted to found "the Daughters of Charity" for the service of the poor, he found himself up against the same difficulty. So he declared "since this is the case we will not be religious! He also declared that for his Daughters "the street would be their cloister!"

So the "Sisters of St Vincent de Paul" are not judiciously/canonically—Religious then, but the irony of this is that during the centuries they have been considered by the common people to be the very model of the Religious Woman of "the good sister" as they were affectionately described.

What then prevents the M.S.C. lay people from being considered fully fledged members of the M.S.C. family, in fact or in deed if not in law?

We ought also to remind ourselves without ceasing that this desire of Father Chevalier to make known to everyone, to proclaim everywhere and by every possible means to make known the love of Christ. Among the lay members of the MSC family, we find a certain number of different groups working with certain different statutes ....This could seem to "cause disorder". That would certainly be the case in other Religious families:-- Amongst us, in our family, we consider this a source of riches. To want "unification" that means automatic exclusion of certain members. But **ALL** must have the possibility of being and of calling themselves "Missionaries of the Sacred Heart" ALL of us, everywhere.....