

BLESSED ARE THE PURE IN HEART



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INTRODUCTION:

GRATITUDE:

1. With profound sense of gratitude, I express my joyful thanks to God whose benevolence, multiple favors and merciful love have been evident in our apostolate, our Archdiocese and our province. To Him be honor, glory and never-ending praise for ever.

2. We further thank him for the opportunity to reflect on yet another very important aspect of our faith and life as Christians, namely: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matt. 5:8). Last year we reflected on the Hour of Glory. Prior to that in the earlier years we reflected on the Holy Spirit, the Priesthood and the Sacraments, respectively. I am ever grateful for the warm reception which these pastoral letters have received. I pray that they will continue to assist our journey through life to God's kingdom of glory.

OUR TOPIC:

3. Our topic this year, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God”, (Matt. 5:8), is from Christ's Sermon on the mountain, commonly called the beatitudes. It has to be recalled that in the Sermon on the mount, Jesus employed the beatitudes to address the prevalent unjust socio-political circumstances of his day. With the beatitudes he presented God's standard as he addressed the circumstances of the world of Augustus Caesar's Roman Empire and the religious elitism of the Jewish society.

4. The same message is now addressed to us as it is still very relevant in our time today. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God”, is one of the most important statements of Jesus Christ in the Scriptures. It contains both a challenge and a promise which are fundamental to the Christian life. Indeed, the theme of purity of heart can be seen from the beginning of the Bible to its end. It is observed from the garden of Eden where Adam and Eve lost their purity of heart through disobedience in the book of Genesis (Gen. 3:7) and ended with the book of Revelation where those whose names are written in the book of life, who are marked with the seal of the living God, are

those who have washed themselves clean with the blood of the Lamb (Rev. 7:14). The pure of heart is simply the inwardly uncorrupted. Those who act with right motives devoid of corruption towards others. Those who act with sincerity towards God. Purity of heart is a state of inner goodness, a state of innocence and cleanliness, a state of being wholly integral, a state of sincerity and pure motives.

5. Given that the depth of this topic cannot be exhausted in a brief pastoral letter like ours, we shall make honest effort to bring out the essential messages contained therein. This statement of Jesus is a challenge to us because, as a consequence of original sin, the bible reminds us that, “the heart of man is deceitful above all things and perverse too, who can pierce its secrets” (Jer. 17:9). Consequently, due to our perverse nature we cannot reform our hearts by our personal efforts alone. The solution is for God to purify our hearts and assists us to reorientate our being towards pleasing Him. No wonder the Psalmist prayed God; “Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew your steadfast spirit within me” (Psalm 51:12). However, our positive response or cooperation is indispensable.

6. The second part of the statement of Christ contains the greatest promise ever made to man, because there is no greater incentive to live for and no greater experience for man to anticipate than to see God and enjoy his company for ever after this life. There is nothing more beautiful than to behold God and be with Him. This beatitude therefore gives us the best secret of how to achieve our purpose in this life: namely the Beatific Vision.

7. In this reflection, we shall first explain the terms purity and heart, including what the bible means by pure in heart. We shall look at purity of heart as a gift from God which demands human response and appreciation. We shall then present some biblical examples of persons who were pure in heart. This is followed by presenting some fruits of purity of heart in the life of a Christian. Further, we shall examine some possible means of acquiring purity of heart and how to preserve it once it is acquired. Finally, we shall look at how the pure in heart shall see God. This leads us into the conclusion and prayer for purity of heart.

MOTIVATION AND CHOICE OF TOPIC

8. This reflection aims at advancing a concrete proposal for living out the Christian virtue of purity of heart in our contemporary society. In a time like ours when the world glorifies vengeful, hateful and lustful acts against each other, when forgiveness is thought as weakness, chastity considered outdated or idealistic, the gentle hearted is ignored or abused, it is our wish to invite the society to embrace the virtue of purity of heart. This purity of heart encompasses the purity of mind, purity of body and purity of the spirit. God is pure spirit and no one sees him without the necessary shedding-off the baggage that leads to the transformation of heart. Today, our society is growing steadily in impunity of might-is-right, pleasure-is-life syndrome. The abuse of power and pleasure, as well as unbridled quest for material wealth remain the order of the day.

9. Therefore, we are inviting our faithful in Christ and all people of good will, to the wisdom of the Beatitudes. Today, more than ever before, we need to gird ourselves with the garb of purity of heart as part of the solutions for a society beset with a myriad of social, moral and political evils that threaten not just the fabric of peaceful coexistence, but also the condition of individual lives.

CHAPTER ONE

CLARIFICATION OF TERMS

10. Purity: The word pure actually means to be blameless, clean, unstained and without blemish. It is a state of cleanliness and a condition of being uncontaminated. Purity is a state of being unmixed. Morally, purity is a state of cleanliness, innocence, moral integrity and untarnished character.

11. Heart: The word heart has two major meanings, the physical heart which aids the circulation of blood in the human body, and the metaphysical heart which is the center of life operations where thoughts, wills, desires, sense of purpose and understanding reside. It extends beyond the physical organ, and actually, symbolizes the essence of one's character, emotions and spirituality. The heart is the figurative core of one's being and the seat and center of human life, emotion and volition. The heart is also regarded as the symbol of love, the seat of strength and life in the human person.

WHAT DOES JESUS MEAN BY THE TERM “PURE”?

12. The word “pure” in itself as already described, is attractive and appealing. It is a term used to describe things that are clean and unadulterated. We have two types of purity, namely; Material purity and Spiritual purity. Material purity means that a thing, person or place has no dirt or filthiness. It means that the substance of a thing is perfect and original without the mixture of any inferior material. It means external cleanliness. We all love material purity which explains why we make efforts to keep our bodies and our environment clean. Material purity is always pleasant to the eyes and promotes our good health. Filthiness and dirt are hateful to the human senses and they generally breed diseases and sicknesses.

13. However, Spiritual purity is more important than Material purity. Spiritual purity is a life of nobility, transparency and integrity. It is an uncompromising desire for a blameless, guiltless life. It is total commitment to God in all things expressed not just in the purity of external behavior but in the purity of the soul, the center of life. Spiritual purity is a life free from malice, deceit,

selfishness, impurity and self-serving motives but characterized by compassion, honesty, love of God and love for others.

14. We know that matter is temporal and ephemeral while Spirit is immortal and eternal. So, whenever the word pure is used in a spiritual sense, it connotes some deeper realities. In the Bible, the Greek word used for the term pure is *Katharos*. The Bible uses this term in a variety of ways. It uses it to describe a dirty thing which has been washed clean and which has been returned to its original state. It also uses it to describe corn which has been winnowed or sifted and thus cleansed from every chaff.

15. Therefore, whenever Jesus uses the term pure, it means something that is clean, unadulterated, unmixed or unalloyed. In the context of this beatitude, Jesus means a person who is clean and honest inside and outside, who has no defilement in the soul, mind, spirit and body; a person who is inwardly sincere in his relationship with God. In other words, a person who hates and abhors sin. Simply put, the Lord Jesus is saying here, I am after a heart that is unmixed in its devotion, a heart that

is unmixed in its motivation, a heart that is unmixed in its commitment to God.

THE BIBLICAL MEANING OF THE TERM “HEART”

16. The term “heart” is one of the most important words in the life of the human person. However, when the bible talks about the heart, it does not refer to the human biological organ which we feel palpitating inside our chest, which is the central force of the bodily functions. This organ is an indispensable part of man without which no human being can survive. Nevertheless, when Jesus talked about the heart, he was not referring to the above organ but to the central spiritual force of the human soul. Thus, the biblical heart stands for that place where choices are made between right and wrong.

17. The heart here means the place where decisions are taken about the way of life or line of conduct a person wants to pursue. It is in the heart of man that his character is molded. It is the heart that guides every single choice made by a person. The heart is the master of the course and conduct of a man's life. The heart is the source and center of a person's entire life which includes the mind, the will and the

emotions. It refers to the deepest essence of one's personality. It is the captain of the ship of every human life.

18. As the physical heart which beats in the chest to sustain the natural life is important, so also this “spiritual-power-house”, the spiritual heart, is indispensable for the survival of the human person. The heart is therefore the core of man's being which gives ultimate direction to his life. Jesus explained it clearly when he said, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt. 6:21). This means that our values, our desires, our loves are all found in our hearts. The heart therefore represents our truest self. It is the center of who we are.

19. What can we call the Christian meaning of a Pure Heart?

Having seen the meaning of the terms pure and heart, we can now understand what Jesus means by a pure heart. Biblically speaking, purity of heart means spiritual integrity. It means singleness of motive and singleness of devotion to God. It includes sincerity of worship as opposed to

duplicity, double standards and double mindedness. It implies being pure in mind, thoughts, feelings and actions in relation to God and man. It means a correspondence of man's will to the will of God. The heart represents who you are, in fact, your true self. Therefore to be pure in heart stands for nobility of intention and a clear conscience. St. Augustine teaches that purity of heart comes from a clear conscience and righteous deeds which enable man to contemplate the highest good. St. John Chrysostom describes the pure in heart as those who possess all the virtues, those not repelled by their conscience and as such they live in serenity and peace. St. Gregory of Nyssa, defines purity of heart as separation from any form of evil, a heart not controlled by passions and far away from stains. A pure heart reflects God's full image that was given to the human person at creation.

20. Given the importance of a pure heart, we can say that its necessity can never be over emphasized in the Christian life. From the Christian perspective therefore, we can define a pure heart as the heart purified from sin by the Holy Spirit with the blood of Jesus Christ and enabled to please God in all things. It is the heart that loves God with all its powers and loves its neighbour as itself. Joseph Breault in his theological writings defines a pure

heart as, “an attitude of a Christian in constant conversion, one who turns to the indwelling Trinity abiding within him in order to achieve absolute surrender to God”. A pure heart is one which does not live double lives but which invites Christ to become the Lord and Master over even its unconscious self. In fact, a pure heart is an undivided heart in relation to God and man.

21. Purity of Heart in the Old Testament.

In the Old Testament, purity was essentially linked to the observance of the law, which degenerated to externalism. They applied to the context of food, diseases, childbirth, funerals and many more (cf. Lev. 11:1-47; Deut. 14:3-21). Such laws like, “Their flesh you shall not eat, their carcasses you shall not touch; they are unclean to you” (Lev. 11:8) were strictly observed. Anyone who touches a dead body is defiled until he purifies himself (cf. Num. 19:13). In general, the Old Testament understands the pure in heart as one who does not have any contamination whether ritual or physical. In fact, ritual purification and ablutions were deeply entrenched in Judaism. They believed that the external cleansing will purify the heart. The practical exigency of these rituals, not

withstanding, God continues to reveal that God's reign requires more than the externals. For example, in the choice of David as the king of Israel, Samuel said, "people look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7). Also, the psalmist exclaims that to climb the mountain of the Lord, only the man with clean hands and pure heart, whose heart is not set on vanities... can qualify (cf. Ps. 24:3-4). These show that even in the Old Testament true cleanliness and purity of heart should go beyond ritual activities and externals.

22. Purity of Heart in the New Testament.

In the teachings of Christ, purity of heart no longer laid emphasis on externals and rituals but laid emphasis on internal and integral purity. Christ exposed the understanding of the heart as the ensemble of the elements of human operations. He often quoted the commandment which says, "you should love the Lord your God with all your heart..." (Deut. 6:5; Mark 12:30-31; Matt. 22:37).

23. All through his teachings, Jesus emphasized the importance of internal purity of heart. According to

the Gospel of Matthew, "Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen and understand. What goes into someone's mouth does not defile them, ... But the things that come out of a person's mouth come from the heart, and these defile them. For out of the heart come evil thoughts: murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what defile a person" (Matt. 15:10-11, 18-20). This teaching placed Christ in opposition with the Pharisees who were more interested in outward appearances. Jesus challenged them when he said, "Woe to you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful but inside are full of ... uncleanness" (Matt. 23:27).

24. For the New Testament, a change in life begins with a change of heart. The problem of sin is not outside of man but within him, inside his heart. Once a man can allow God to change his heart, his life changes. When Peter was preaching on the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit touched the hearts of his listeners. The bible says, they were "cut to the heart" and they said to Peter and the other Apostles, "What shall we do"? (Acts 2:37). They were touched and they changed.

CHAPTER TWO

PURITY OF HEART: A GIFT FROM GOD

25. In the New Testament, to have a pure heart is to have a heart that is subject to the refinement of God. The love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given to us (Rom. 5:5). For the New Testament, purity must reside in the heart because once the heart is pure, the entire person is pure.

26. According to T. Watson, there are three kinds of purity which are identifiable. These are (a) primitive purity, (b) created purity, and (c) evangelical purity. The first purity is in God who is the origin, pattern, and prototype of all holiness. He is “glorious in holiness” (Ex. 15:11). The second is a created purity which is found in the Angels and was once in Adam before the original sin. Before the fall, Adam's heart did not have any trace of impurity. The third is the evangelical purity. This is purity achieved by the grace of God. (cf. T. Watson, *The Pure in heart*) 'emphasis is mine'.

27. It is this evangelical purity or purity in the Gospel sense that we are called to embrace. God knows the devastating effects of the original sin in the heart of man. The prophet Jeremiah observed that the heart of man is deceitful and perverse too (Jer. 17:9). No wonder God sent us the Holy Spirit to heal and cleanse us.

28. Starting from the Old Testament, God made a promise of a new heart and a clean heart to man. Hence he says, “I will sprinkle clean water over you and you will be cleansed from all your uncleanness; from all your idols I will cleanse you. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you. I will remove from you the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh instead. And I will put my spirit in you and make you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws” (Ezek. 36:26-27). God's word stands firm forever. We have an assurance that God will fulfill his promise if we are open to him. When we encounter God, he begins his work in our heart. He gradually transforms our heart and gives us new desires which will help us to love him and obey him. He will give us a pure heart if we are open to receive it.

29 . God is able and willing to make us pure.

As recorded in the Gospel of Luke, the Angel Gabriel told Mary that “nothing is impossible with God” (Lk. 1:37). This proclamation assures us that God can literally do anything he wants to do. This knowledge should raise the level of our excitement and expectation from God. Again, it is even more exciting to realize that he is willing to do good in

our favor. The encounter between Jesus and a leper in the Gospel of Matthew assures us of this fact. When, suddenly a man with leprosy came up and bowed low before him, saying “Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean”. Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him saying, I am willing, be cleansed” (Matt. 8:2-3). St Paul gave us a greater assurance of God's benevolence towards us when he said: “If God did not spare his own son, but gave Him up for the sake of all of us, then can we not expect that with him he will freely give us all his gifts?” (Rom. 8:32). We can rightly conclude that it is God's ardent desire to give us a pure heart and he waits for us to respond to his invitation. The very nature of God proves his willingness to make us pure. Every being acts according to its nature, this is often expressed as *agere sequitur esse* (action follows being). God is pure and as such he finds great delight in making men pure so that they may be like him. Obviously, it is the will and desire of God that his children should be pure in heart.

30. Jesus purifies our heart with His blood.

Jesus Christ came into this world, lived, suffered, died and resurrected just for one thing: that he

might restore us to the original purity which God gave to Adam and Eve before the fall which is also called the original sin. The first letter of St. John puts it this way: “the purpose for which the son of God appeared is that he might destroy the works of the devil” (1Jn. 3:8). Purity of heart is a matter of God's grace through the precious blood of Jesus. The bible assures us that “the blood of Jesus Christ purifies us from sin” (1Jn. 1:7). On our own alone, we could never purify ourselves. Hence, Jesus came and used his blood to purify us and make us white as snow. God's great love and mercy invite us through the prophet Isaiah saying, “Come now, let us reason together. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow, though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool” (Isaiah 1: 18-19). The letter to the Hebrews was clear on the power of the blood of Jesus Christ when it says, “in fact, according to the law, every purification takes place by means of the blood; and if there is no shedding of blood, there is no remission of sin” (Heb. 9:22). Again, we see the power of the blood of Jesus in the book of Revelation when it assures us of the reward of the saints: These are people who have been through the great trial and have washed their robes in the blood of the lamb. That is why they are standing in front of God's throne and

serving him day and night in his sanctuary... They will never hunger or thirst again” (Rev. 7:14-16). It was the blood of Jesus that washed them clean. It is simply a way of saying that the blood of Jesus purified their hearts. Through His passion, death, resurrection and ascension, God the Son incarnate has purified our hearts and restored our human nature to friendship with God the Father. He has made our hearts pure in His Sacred Heart, pierced on the cross to remain ever open to receive us. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us, “Jesus came to restore creation to the purity of its origins” (CCC. 2336). The blood of Jesus is the means of man's purity. The justice of God the Father was satisfied in his Son's blood shed on the cross of Calvary. God now invites us so that he can wash our hearts in the blood of his son, Jesus. We are called to make a decision to receive Jesus' gift of purity and to turn away from our impure ways. As we do this, our hearts become pure having been washed in Jesus blood. Let us in humility receive this precious gift. Purity of heart is therefore a gift to those willing to accept it.

31. Need to accept the gift of a pure heart.

The book of Psalms 51:10 records the prayer of David. “Create in me a pure heart, oh God, and renew a right spirit in me”. David said this prayer because he knows that on his own, he is prone to unclean thoughts, emotions and actions. He knows that it is only God who can cleanse man from the mess of our broken humanity. In this prayer, we can learn two things in our relationship with God. The first is that our heart is the most important thing to God. In the first book of Samuel, we read: “the Lord does not see as man sees. Man looks at the outward appearance, but God looks at the heart” (1 Sam. 16:17). Secondly, original sin has messed up the human heart. With the fall of Adam and Eve, sin entered into the world and things started to get really bad for man. However, the worst came when “the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Gen. 6:5).

32. Therefore, the first step to purity of heart is to understand how broken and sinful we are and how much we are in need of God's intervention and mercy. Unless the Lord creates a new heart in us, we will continue to be slaves to the fallen nature of

man. However, God does not force salvation on anyone. He gives us the choice to accept or reject his plan in our lives. He tells us that “today, I have set before you life and prosperity, death and evil” (Deut. 30:15). It is for us to choose. Today as you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts (Ps. 95:8).

CHAPTER THREE

SOME BIBLICAL EXAMPLES OF PERSONS WHO ARE PURE OF HEART

33. Both in the Old Testament and the New, the Bible has notable examples of individuals who were pure in heart. They were not sinless but they lived lives of unwavering integrity and devotion to God. They were not double minded in their love and commitment to God and his will. These individuals serve as inspirations and role models to us especially to some who think that purity of heart is impossible in our generation. Some of these examples include Joseph, David, Daniel, Job, Zacharia and Elizabeth, St. Joseph and our Blessed Mother Mary. We shall briefly look at these characters.

33.1. Joseph: A man liberated by his pure heart.

Among all the Old Testament characters, we learn a lot from the life of Joseph, son of Jacob. Joseph displayed remarkable signs of purity of heart all through his existence, especially at difficult circumstances of his life. In Joseph we see a true

Israelite who has no guile. The heart of Joseph was so pure that he never contemplated revenge against his brothers who sold him to slavery, even when he had every opportunity to pay them back in their own coins. The climax of Joseph's purity of heart was manifested when he resisted the immoral advances of Potiphar's wife. Joseph while staying true to his moral and ethical convictions said to his master's wife: "Because of me, my master does not concern himself with what happens in the house; he has handed all his possessions to me. He is no more master in this house than I am; he has withheld nothing from me except yourself, because you are his wife. How could I do anything so wicked, and sin against God?" (Gen. 39: 8-9). Joseph's unwavering commitment to God, his purity of heart, singleness of mind and his absolute trust in God's plan for his life ultimately led him to a position of high prominence in Egypt. We can learn that Joseph's total commitment to righteousness and integrity reflects a purity of heart that is steadfast and faithful in the face of temptation and adversity.

33.2. David: A man after God's own heart.

The Bible refers to David as a man after God's own

heart. David, son of Jesse was a little boy who was in charge of his father's flock. His pure and passionate love for God and readiness to do God's will despite his weaknesses present him as a good example of a man of purity of heart. His love, passion, emotions, fears and joys expressed in the book of the Psalms are clear evidences of what goes on inside the heart of David. God chose David to be king of Israel because of his purity of heart. David demonstrated this purity of heart in many ways. In Psalm 9:1 he prayed "I will praise you, Oh Lord, with my whole heart". Also, in Psalm 19:14, David expressed the desires of his heart by saying, "let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer". Then, in Psalm 26:2, David shows openness to God, when he said, "Examine me Oh Lord, and prove me and test my heart". David sought God in his innermost being. His heart was fixed on God constantly. He sang a song in Psalm 57:7, "My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast. I will sing and make music to God with all my being".

David is a good example for all of us who are still struggling with our human weaknesses. He made very serious mistakes in life but his heart never left God. When he realized his atrocious acts of

adultery and murder, he immediately cried to God, fasting and praying: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your loving kindness, according to the multitude of your tender mercies blot out my sins... create in me a pure heart, O God and renew a right spirit within me" (Ps. 51:1, 10). David was ready to lose everything but not his purity of heart. So, David teaches us that we can be pure in heart while making sincere efforts to overcome our weaknesses and be transformed into the image of God.

33.3. Daniel: A man beyond accusation.

The young man called Daniel was a captive in Babylon. However, due to his unmitigated love and devotion to God, he was favored more than every other person in the province. Daniel demonstrated an unshakable commitment to his faith in God. Despite facing persecution and challenging situations, Daniel remained pure in heart, abstaining from the king's food in order to avoid ritual defilement, and continuing to pray to God. His steadfastness in the face of adversity exemplifies the strength of a pure heart. The proof of Daniel's purity of heart was manifested when the rest of the governors were jealous of him because

he was loved by the king. They wanted to accuse Daniel of some evil in order to discredit him before the king but they could find no accusation against him. This is the way the bible presents it: “This Daniel by virtue of the marvelous spirit residing in him, was so evidently superior to the governors and satraps that the king considered appointing him to rule the whole kingdom. The governors and satraps in consequence started hunting for some affair of state by which they could discredit Daniel; but they could find nothing to his discredit, no case of negligence; he was so punctilious that they could not find a single instance of maladministration or neglect. These men then thought, “We shall never find a way of discrediting Daniel unless we try something to do with the law of his God” (Dan. 6: 4-6). This simply means that there was no corruption in Daniel. He had no questionable character. He was diligent in his relationship with God and men. Simply put, Daniel was pure in heart.

33.4. Job: A man of integrity.

The biblical Job a prosperous man of outstanding piety showed his faith in God and devotion to him were deeply rooted in his love of God and not on the blessings he was enjoying. At the center of Job's

story is his relationship with God. Job chose to serve God in sincerity and truth. He was not forced or coerced by anyone or anything. It was a personal decision he took. The bible described him as follows: “There was once a man in the land of Uz called Job: a blameless and upright man who feared God and shunned evil. Seven sons and three daughters were born to him... It was the custom of his sons to hold banquets in each other's houses, one after the other, and to send and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. Once each series of banquets were over, Job would send for them to come and be purified, and at dawn on the following day he would offer a holocaust for each of them. Perhaps, Job would say, my sons have sinned and, in their hearts, affronted God. So that was what he used to do year after year” (Job. 1:1-2, 4-5). The Bible described Job as “a blameless and upright man who feared God and shunned evil”. The word blameless here does not mean that Job was no longer human. But, it means that he was sincere in his faith and devotion to God. He was not a hypocrite. He walked constantly with God and took God as his best treasure in life. Consequently, God was simply proud of Job. The most fascinating lesson in the life of Job was his patience and endurance in the face of suffering.

These virtues are marks of integrity which is a symbol of purity of heart. Sometimes God tests us to bring out the best in us while Satan often tests us to bring out the worst. Satan challenged God that Job was faithful to Him because of the favors and blessings of God. He therefore accused Job of conditional love for God. Consequently, God allowed Satan to tempt Job. He did. He destroyed Job's wealth, health and even children, Nevertheless, Job a man of pure heart persevered in his total devotion and dedication to God. Job feared God out of love and was not ready to sin against God, even in the face of unbearable circumstances. Finally, due to his purity of heart, the story of Job has one of the happiest endings imaginable in human history.

33.5. Zacharia and Elizabeth were blameless.

In the Gospel of Luke, we read the following interesting but challenging verses: “In the days of king Herod of Judea, there lived a priest called Zacharia who belonged to the Abijah section of the priesthood, and he had a wife, Elizabeth by name, who was a descendant of Aaron. Both were righteous in the sight of God, and scrupulously observed all the commandments and observances

of the Lord. But they were childless: Elizabeth was barren and they were both getting on in years” (Lk. 1: 5-7). This passage tells us that this couple was blameless before God, they “were righteous in the sight of God”. It means they were honest, sincere and not hypocritical in their relationship with God. In other words, they were pure in heart. There is another very important lesson which the life of this couple teaches us. Though they were righteous and blameless before God, they had no child because Elizabeth was barren. This reminds us that even godly people, saintly people, people with pure hearts also have challenges in their lives. The pure in heart can also suffer misfortune in life. But, just like Job, Zacharia and Elizabeth maintained their blameless life till God answered their prayers. It is important to remember that Zacharia is a Hebrew name which means, “God remembers”. In fact, God never forgets nor abandons a person with a pure heart.

33.6. St. Joseph: A just and upright man.

St. Joseph, husband of the Blessed Virgin Mary was a man known for his purity of heart. His chaste heart is a clear reference to his purity and holiness. No wonder God gave him the privilege to be the

foster-father of Jesus Christ. In that way, he was able to see God face to face under the veil of the child Jesus for many years. God would not have entrusted his pure and sinless son to an impure and sinful man, to be his protector and guardian. We can see the pure heart of St. Joseph manifested in his loving devotion to the Holy family. St. Joseph was perfectly consecrated to God that we can go to him to learn how to obtain purity of heart.

33.7. Blessed Virgin Mary: A model of purity of heart.

St. John Damascene said that the heart of the Blessed Virgin Mary is the abode and the sanctuary of all virtues. The heart of Mary bears a striking resemblance and affinity to divine purity. God the Father chose Mary to be the mother of His incarnate son. Thus, God formed her in the womb of her mother, St. Ann, without the stain of original sin and its effect of concupiscence. This special grace of Immaculate Conception perfectly ordered the life of the Blessed Virgin Mary, especially her heart. At the annunciation, not only that the womb of the Blessed Mary became the abode of the word made flesh but also her heart was perfectly united from the beginning, with the Most Sacred Heart of

Jesus, her son. Due to her Immaculate Conception, the heart of Mary was pure, and she possessed a spiritual perception of God beyond any other creature. At the annunciation, the Angel Gabriel greeted Mary as “full of Grace” but Mary responded, “I am the handmaid of the Lord, be it done to me according to your word” (Lk. 1:38). This also shows purity of heart and docility to divine providence. Having become the instrument through which God the Son came to dwell with us, the Blessed Virgin Mary also became the means through which God continues to pour forth his graces into our hearts. In today's world which has become very secularized and hostile to purity, the Blessed Virgin Mary stands out as a model of intimacy with God. She is our model of purity of heart.

CHAPTER FOUR

SOME FRUITS OF PURITY OF HEART

34. Purity of heart has many fruits and many benefits. A person who is pure in heart constantly grows in his understanding, perception and discernment of God. He is at home with God's ways, His will and His commandments. The purity of heart opens the eyes of any human person in such a way that the person can constantly walk in the light and fellowship of God. Purity of heart comes with many advantages some of which we shall discuss.

34.1. A Pure Heart is a Dwelling Place of God.

Living a life of purity is the best way to attract the presence of God. Anyone who wants to enjoy the constant presence of God should avoid impurity, “for the eyes of the Lord are too pure to behold iniquity or tolerate evil” (Habakkuk 1:13). John the Apostle says that God is light and in him there is no darkness (1John 1:5). Therefore, anyone who wants God to dwell in him must be pure in imitation of the purity of God. When a Christian lives a pure life, he is filled with the Holy Spirit. St. Paul

assures us that our bodies are indeed the temples of the Holy Spirit who dwells in our hearts (cf. 1 Cor. 6:19). God created man to be the bearer of his presence and glory.

34.2. A Pure Heart Ensures Holiness of Life.

Anyone who is always conscious of the purity of his heart finds it easier to live a life of holiness. Once a person's heart is pure, every other thing about that person will be pleasing to God. Purity of heart liberates one from the bondage of sin. A person may recognize his sins and would want to be liberated but if his heart is not pure, he may find himself going back to the sin. Virtues easily grow in a pure heart because purity is the best seed-ground for holiness.

34.3. A Pure Heart Guarantees Peace of Soul.

Whenever a person maintains a pure heart, his life will be overwhelmed by the peace promised us by Our Lord Jesus Christ who said, “Peace I bequeath to you, my peace I give to you, a peace which the world cannot give, this is my gift to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid” (Jn. 14:27). Only this type of peace can make a person calm and

serene in every situation. The peace of Christ rests in a pure heart. Only a person who has the peace of mind can be at peace with other people. If your heart is cleansed, you will not have the guilty conscience and condemnation which come with sinful actions. The pure in heart will always enjoy peace of soul. However, as the prophet Isaiah warned, “the wicked has no peace” (Is. 48:22).

34.4. A Pure Heart is an Anchor for Strong Faith.

Purity of heart disposes us to believe the truth of God's promises even though we may not be seeing them at the moment. Purity of heart helps and compels us to believe in the love of God, knowing that He will never disappoint us. The letter to the Hebrews insists that without faith, it is impossible to please God (Heb. 11:6). Faith, we know, is the foundation of our relationship with God. Without it, no one can be a good Christian in the true sense. The letter to the Hebrews (Heb. 11:1) defines faith “as the assurance of things not seen, the conviction of things not yet revealed”. Purity of heart is an anchor for strong faith. It assists us to live beyond difficult situation with the assurance that God is still in control of everything that happens in our

lives. The reason many Christians are demoralized is due to lack of faith. Purity of heart enables faith to grow stronger. A pure heart helps the human person to see what the ordinary eyes cannot see and to perceive things beyond human imagination.

34.5. A Pure Heart is on Fire with Love.

The best way to be filled with true love which is Agape love is by having a pure heart. Agape love is that love which is pure, selfless and unconditional in nature. It enables one to love God above all things and love one's neighbour as one's self. Agape love is the unconditional, unconquerable goodwill towards one's neighbour for the sake of God. Pure Heart is the home of Agape love. Therefore, a man of pure heart labours to have the mind of Christ Jesus and be conformed to his image (Rom. 8:29). It is always his aim to be unselfish, to be selfless, even as Christ pleased not Himself; to walk in love, even as Christ loved us, to be totally committed to God even as Christ was obedient to the heavenly Father, even unto death.

A man or woman of Pure Heart will always follow the golden rule, making sincere effort to do to others that which he would like them to do to him. A man of pure heart bears much in love, forbears

much, overlooks much and is always slow to quarrel with other people. Such a person loves others selflessly even when they do not deserve his love. A pure heart is filled with divine love.

CHAPTER FIVE

HOW TO ACQUIRE A PURE HEART

35. Today, purity of heart is no longer popular among the people of our generation. Indeed, some believe it is impossible and impracticable to live a life of purity. It is good to recall that purification of heart is the work of God that only needs our cooperation. We have already seen that God is willing to bless us with the gift of a pure heart. Let us now examine our roles which will enable us to accept this gift from God.

35.1. Recognizing the value of purity of heart.

The first step towards acquiring purity of heart, is to recognize and acknowledge its value. Unless we place a value on something, we may never desire it or pursue it. Our society today does not recognize the value of purity and that is why so much premium is put on vanity and worldliness. As Christians, when we speak of purity, we do not mean only chastity or sexual continence but it refers to chastity, charity, nobility and integrity in every aspect of our being. It includes our thoughts, feelings, motives, relationships, words and

actions. One can therefore say that a man who is pure in heart has kept the whole law. Recognizing this fact makes purity of heart appealing and disposes one to pay any price to acquire it.

35.2. Need to take a decision: Purity of Intention.

Keeping our heart pure is a choice that one makes and continues to make daily. God in his kindness equipped the human person in creation with a special gift called the will. Animals do not have this unique faculty- which helps humans to consciously process decision-making. A pure heart is built on daily choices. It does not magically develop in man. It is grown and maintained by the constant practice of purity and renewal of good intentions. One of the greatest privileges given to man by God is the opportunity to choose our way of life. We decide whether we will live our life in purity of heart or in sin. We decide who will be the lord and master of our life: Jesus Christ or selfishness. We decide if salvation is important to us or we are going to live according to our carnal desires. This is an awesome gift which every individual should make good use of. Keeping one's heart pure is a decision that should be made daily realizing that its benefits

outweigh whatever price we may pay for it. Once a person begins to experience the benefits of a pure heart, he will forever cherish it. Please, decide!

35.3. Prayer and Practice.

We have repeatedly said that purity of heart is a gift from God. We, therefore, need to always pray for a pure heart. God can create a pure heart out of an impure and sinful heart. He uses his grace to achieve this in the hearts of men. However, it is through prayer that man encounters God who purifies the heart. Prayer is the means through which Christians talk to God and make their requests to him as a child to his father.

Generally, people pray for wealth and health but rarely pray for the gift of a pure heart. In fact, we should fervently ask God for the gift of a pure heart. It should be the most important prayer for every Christian. We should make this prayer with every sincerity like Hannah the mother of the prophet Samuel, who poured out her soul to God. It is also in prayer that God reveals to us how pure or impure our hearts are. There is no better way to ask for a pure heart from God than through prayer. David recognized the secret and power of prayer

and so he prayed: “Create in me, a pure heart, O God; renew in me a steadfast spirit” (Ps. 51: 12). Note that prayer is the foundation and the key but prayer alone does not produce purity of heart. It is impossible without prayer at the same time it is not reducible to prayer. Prayer and practice go together.

35.4. Acceptance of Divine Providence.

Faith in Divine Providence means total surrender to God. Every human person is born with original sin, which makes it difficult for a person to fully submit to God. We like to control our lives and be the masters of our existence here on earth. Simply put, man likes to do his will. This innate attitude of man challenges God's authority and control over our lives. But when a person encounters God through Jesus Christ, a miracle happens. St. Paul explains the miracle in these words: “If anyone be in Christ Jesus, he is a new creature, old things have passed away and everything has become new” (2 Cor. 5:17). This is the miracle of purification which God effects in our hearts. Once God purifies our hearts through Jesus Christ, we surrender our lives to him and we no longer want to withhold anything from him. Christ therefore becomes the Master and Lord of our lives. At this stage we do everything for the

glory of God. God himself supplies the strength and we are able to act according to God's standard. Thus, acceptance of Divine providence generates purity of heart.

35.5. Faith in the Gift of God.

In the Acts of the Apostles, we read that, God purified the hearts of Christians by faith (Acts 15:9). In the same way he purifies our own hearts if we have faith. Therefore, when we have acknowledged the value of purity of heart, taken a decision to pursue it, prayed for it and have surrendered our wills to God, what remains is to accept the gift of purity of heart in faith. It can be accepted in faith, Faith in the blood of Jesus Christ who cleanses our hearts from every stain of sin. Recall that the woman who touched the garment of Jesus did not wait to see physical signs before she accepted that she has been healed. This is why Jesus told her: “My daughter, your faith has restored you to health; go in peace and be free from your ailment” (Mark 5:34). It is faith in God that will remove every mountain and obstacles against the gift of purity of heart. God has given us this gift through the blood of his son. We need to accept this gift in faith.

CHAPTER SIX

HOW TO SAFEGUARD AND STRENGTHEN PURITY OF HEART

36. The book of Proverbs urges us to “keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flows the spring of life” (Proverbs 4:23). This passage reminds us to do all things possible to protect the purity of our hearts. We must guard the gate of our hearts to make it obey the Lord Jesus (2 Cor. 10:5). Impurity destroys the entire man and denies the heart the joy of union with God. Let us consider some steps we need to take to preserve the purity of our hearts.

36.1. Daily Renewal through the Word of God.

The number one way of sustaining the purity of our hearts is through meditation on and reading of the word of God in the Sacred Scriptures. Jesus told his apostles: “you are already clean by the power of the word that I have spoken to you” (John 15:3). The word of God is pure not only in its content but also in its effect. The bible reminds us that the word of God is alive and active and cuts more finely than any double-edged sword (Heb. 4: 12). Consequently, the word of God sanctifies those

who accept and believe it. When we spend time on meditation and filling our hearts with the word of God, we are continually purified. It is in the word of God that we constantly find strength, wisdom, and direction for living. Therefore, God's word is our never-failing, never-ending source of purity.

36.2. Regular Sacramental Confession.

The Sacrament of reconciliation is an amazing purifying tool at the immediate disposal of every child of God. This Sacrament provides us with a constant and on-going means of keeping impurities out of our hearts. A famous spiritual writer, Fr. Charles Lallemanat recommends sacramental confession as a means of purity of heart. He says, “For the oftener we confess, the more we purify ourselves, the grace proper to this sacrament being purity of conscience. Thus, every confession, besides the increase of habitual grace and of the gifts, imparts also a fresh sacramental grace, that is to say, a new title to receive from God both actual graces and the aids necessary for emancipating ourselves more and more from sin” (C. Lallemanat, *The Spiritual Doctrine*, II, Chapter 6). Our Lord Jesus Christ having accomplished His saving work on cross at Calvary, unflinchingly

continues to invite us to unite our hearts with His glorious pierced Heart. This enables us to receive therein the grace of purification from sin and animation with Divine Truth and Love. When we make a good sacramental confession, God no longer sees sin or our sinful hearts but the purity acquired through the precious blood of the lamb. It is a free gift given to those who approach the Sacrament of reconciliation with humility.

36.3. The Power of the Holy Eucharist.

In every Mass, we are bathed in the precious blood of Jesus Christ. The Holy Mass is the re-enactment of the Calvary event where Jesus washed us in his blood. It is in the mass that we encounter the real presence of Jesus who unites our hearts with his and makes us one with himself. Pope John Paul II teaches us that in Christ's real presence in the Eucharist, “the mystery of communion is so perfect that it brings us to the heights of every good thing. Here is the ultimate goal of every human desire, because here we attain God, and God joins himself to us in the most perfect union”. By receiving Christ in the Eucharist, we are united with him and our lives become transformed by His love and His presence. In this way our heart is gradually transformed to become like his pure heart.

36.4. Avoidance of Occasions of Sin.

Keeping our hearts pure fundamentally involves being vigilant with our surroundings. This means being conscious of who we deal with, where we go to, and what we see, hear or touch. We should be mindful of the influence which certain people have on the purity of our hearts. If we notice that a particular person is having a negative influence on the purity of our heart, then there is need to reconsider that relationship. Our ears, eyes and minds are gateways for purity or impurity into our hearts. What sources are you listening to, looking at or thinking about? These will determine the purity of your life. Purity of heart also involves keeping in check the sort of feelings and emotions we allow to rule us. There is a new trend these days, to live by what feels “right to me”. Keeping oneself pure is choosing to think, say and do the right things regardless of what one feels like doing.

36.5. Being a Light and a Credible Witness.

Avoidance of occasions of sin does not necessarily mean running away from people or from the world. We are meant to be witnesses to the people around us while we make every effort not to model our lives on the world around us. True religion is all about putting our faith into practice. St. James

CHAPTER SEVEN

puts it this way: “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world” (James 1:27). Living a pure life is not escaping from the world but it means confronting the world head on and permeating it with the Spirit of Christ. It is not impossible to avoid the pollution and impurities that fill the world. This is because we have been given God's power to overcome the world and permeate it with the love of Christ. Christ tells us you are the salt of the earth and with Christ we are the light of the world.

BLESSED ARE THE PURE IN HEART

37. The Beatitude: “Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God” (Matt. 5:8), contains the most wonderful promise God has made to mankind, that is, the beatific vision. However, this promise is not only for the future since Jesus during this earthly life and public ministry, repeatedly said, “the kingdom of God is within you” (Lk. 17:21). With the coming of Jesus, the kingdom of God has broken into our world. Consequently, we would expect that to some degree, we ought to be able to see God now before uniting with him permanently in heaven. St. Paul puts it better when he says: “We see now very dimly as in a mirror, but hereafter we shall see him face to face” (1 Cor. 13:12). Let us examine some of the ways we can see God in this world and how we can finally be united with him in heaven.

37.1. They see God in Nature:

The pure in heart see God now in nature. The book of Psalms did not leave us in doubt about the manifestation of divine presence in nature. It

states, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world” (Ps. 19: 1-4). The presence of the Lord is perceptible in almost everything around us. Nature reflects God since God can be seen through all He has created. The beauty we see in nature is a reflection of God's beauty. Spending quiet time in nature opens our vision to the beauty of God. This can bring us closer to God. Many times in the New Testament we see Jesus going out into the wilderness or going up to the mountain to pray, meditate and be alone with God. When Adam and Eve were pure in heart, they were able to see God walking in the Garden in the cool of the evening (Gen. 3:8). To a man or woman of pure heart, God comes to him through nature.

37.2. They see God in His Word.

The pure in heart see God in the Holy Scripture. They see God through what he has revealed about himself in his word, the letter to the Hebrews, states: “At various times in the past and in various different ways, God spoke to our ancestors through

the prophets; but in our own time, the last days, he has spoken to us through his son. The son that he has appointed to inherit everything and through whom he made everything there is” (Heb. 1:1-2). John the Apostle went a step further to identify the true nature of this word of God when he said: “In the beginning was the Word; and the Word was with God and the Word was God” (John 1:1). Truly, the pure in heart see God in every page, chapter and verse of the bible when they read it devoutly and prayerfully.

37.3. They see God in the Sacraments.

Sacraments are efficacious signs of Grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us. The celebration of the sacraments makes present the graces proper to each sacrament. They bear fruits in those who receive them with the required disposition. When we say that the sacraments are “efficacious signs of grace”, it simply means that the sacraments make the person of God and his actions (that is God's actions) present to us in the here and now. It means that through the sacraments, God acts in ways that are perceptible to human senses. The celebration of the

sacraments provides us the opportunities to realize that we are in the presence of God. The seven Sacraments of the Church simply celebrate God's presence and participation in our lives. Each of the seven sacraments is a moment of encounter with the Triune God. However, above the rest of the sacraments, the Holy Eucharist is the greatest sign of God's presence. In it, God is present to us in a real and profound manner. In it we are provided the opportunity to be with God, talk to him and gaze at him while still in the world.

37.4. They see God in their Neighbour:

One of the best places we can see God in this world is in the faces of the people we meet. The bible assures us that man was created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27). This is one of the fundamental truths of the bible. This truth brings us freedom and gives us a true sense of the real identity of every human person we meet on the street. Every single individual was wonderfully made by God to be a reflection of his divine nature. So, we see and meet God when we serve the sick, the elderly, the widows and the orphans, thus honouring the image of God in them. We see God by offering hospitality to the strangers, the immigrant, the poor and the

refugee, ministering to their needs as if ministering to Christ himself (Matt. 25:31-46). On a simpler note, we see God by offering a smile to that person we meet on the road as if offering the smile to Christ. No wonder Jean Valjean said, "To love another person is to see the face of God". Truly, the pure in heart see God in their neighbour.

37.5. They will see God forever in eternity.

From all we have said, we can conclude that the hope of achieving our glorious experience after our earthly life hangs on one thing, namely purity of heart. The Lord Jesus did not mince words when he said: "Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God" (Matt. 5:8). This is a privilege given only to those who are pure in heart. It is a glorious privilege. On that day, the veil will be pulled off and God will show himself to the pure in heart as He really is. St. John puts it clearly as he says; "Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called Children of God! Therefore, the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when it is revealed, we shall be like him, for we shall see Him

as He is. And everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as He is pure” (1 John 3:1-3). This sight of God will be the heaven of heavens, the quintessence of happiness and bliss, the *Summum Bonum*. The sight will be so sublime, sweet and perpetual. Only the pure in heart shall see God. They are indeed blessed!

CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSION

38. The sublime words of Jesus Christ; “Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God” (Matt. 5:8), can be described as the culmination of the message of Jesus. It is the climax of the beatitudes as it offers us the greatest blessings any human being can receive. A look at all the beatitudes reminds us that, the poor in spirit receive an eternal inheritance; mourners receive comfort; the meek inherit the earth; the hungry and thirsty for righteousness receive satisfaction; the merciful receive mercy; the peace makers receive Divine filiation; and the persecuted receive an eternal reward. The pure in heart, however, see God face to face and live with him forever.

39. Since knowing, seeing and being with God is our highest pursuit in life, our highest or ultimate good, there will be no cost too much to pay in order to receive such a blessed assurance. Keeping your heart pure is worthwhile for a happy life here on earth and for a blessed life in eternity. The central message of this pastoral letter is this; God can take

our hearts, if we cooperate with him, if we willingly submit to him, if we seek his will always; no matter how messed up our hearts may be, He can make them pure in order to prepare us to see him and live with him eternally in heaven. Let us therefore pray for purity of heart. Let us work for it. Let us willingly submit to the power of God's grace which can purify us. It is the prerequisite for eternal glory.

CHAPTER NINE

PRAYER

40. Grant, we pray, Oh Almighty God, that the splendor of your glory may shine forth upon us, and that, by the bright rays of the Holy Spirit, the light of your light may confirm the hearts of those born again by your Grace. Give us a clean heart and your Holy Spirit. Through Our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you, in the Unity of the Holy Spirit, God forever and ever. Amen!

(Adapted from the alternative Collect of Pentecost Vigil)

Given in Onitsha, at the Cathedral Basilica of the Most Holy Trinity, on 14th February, Ash Wednesday, in the year of Our Lord 2024

MOST REV. VALERIAN M. OKEKE

Archbishop of Onitsha.

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