

# St. Margaret Mary Alacoque

BORN 1647; DIED 1690  
VIRGIN AND RELIGIOUS  
FEAST DAY: OCTOBER 16



**W**ITHOUT FREE WILL, there can be no love and no loving relationships. Jesus' sacrifice on Calvary was an act of infinite love.

For God, nothing else is more important than responding to his love with love. St. Margaret Mary Alacoque was commissioned in a special way by our Lord to make this desire known to all.

Margaret Mary was born in L'Hautecour in the Burgundy region of east-central France. She was the fifth of seven children of Claude Alacoque, a notary, and Philiberte Lamyn. The most important element in her early upbringing was her parents' virtue and life of devotion. From her earliest years, she was herself devout, especially reverencing the Blessed Sacrament. At four, she made a vow of chastity (acknowledging years later that she had no idea what "vow" and "chastity" even meant). Her father died when she was eight. She was sent to the Poor Clares for her education but, at eleven, fell ill with rheumatic fever and was sent home. She remained bedridden for four years, but instantly became healthy when, at fifteen and old enough to understand, she vowed to the Blessed Virgin to consecrate herself for life as a nun.

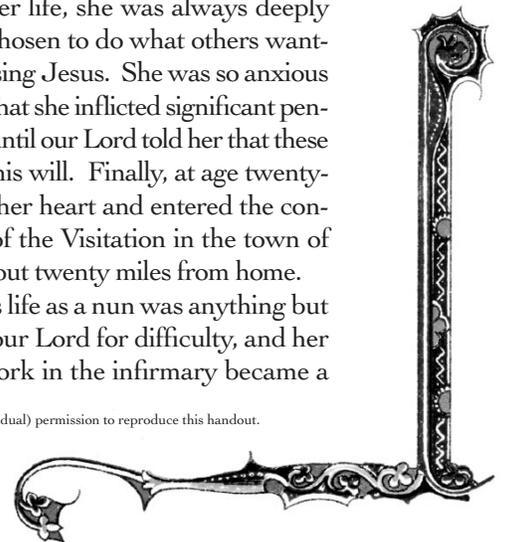
The next several years in Margaret Mary's life were ones of turmoil and anguish. By this time, other relatives had taken over running the family home, and her mother was treated with scorn. Margaret Mary could not stop the abuse of her mother, and was badly treated herself. She was told she was selfish and lazy. Her desire to go to daily Mass was often thwarted by relatives who accused her of merely wanting to flirt with the boys. On many occasions, she fled to the garden, wept, prayed, and didn't eat all day. Only by God's grace

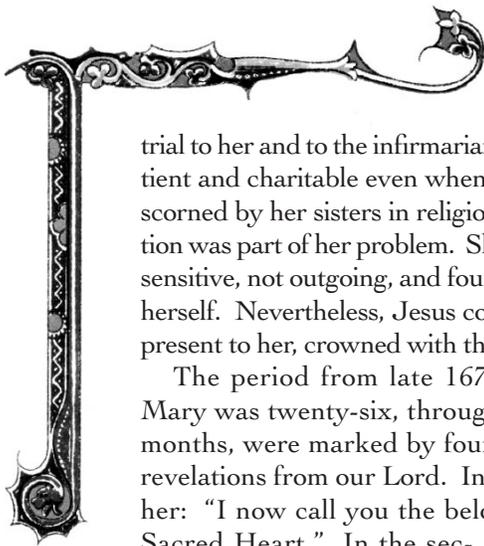
was she able to forgive them. Two of her brothers also died during this time.

Despite these trials, Margaret Mary sought to live a holy life, giving money to the poor, teaching neglected children in the family home or garden, and caring for the sick. Her devotion to the Blessed Mother grew more intense. She was often strongly aware of the presence and protection of Jesus, who most often appeared to her crucified or as the beaten, tortured man just before his crucifixion.

As Margaret Mary entered her late teens, her mother and other family members pressured her to marry. She wanted to obey her mother, and thinking that perhaps her private vow was not binding, she began to wear pretty clothes and go to parties. Throughout her later life, she was always deeply grieved by having chosen to do what others wanted rather than choosing Jesus. She was so anxious about her behavior that she inflicted significant penances upon herself, until our Lord told her that these penances were not his will. Finally, at age twenty-three, she followed her heart and entered the convent of the Sisters of the Visitation in the town of Paray-le-Monial about twenty miles from home.

Margaret Mary's life as a nun was anything but serene. She asked our Lord for difficulty, and her slow and clumsy work in the infirmary became a





trial to her and to the infirmarian. She tried to be patient and charitable even when she was rebuked or scorned by her sisters in religion. Her own disposition was part of her problem. She was impulsive and sensitive, not outgoing, and found it hard to laugh at herself. Nevertheless, Jesus continued to be visibly present to her, crowned with thorns.

The period from late 1673, when Margaret Mary was twenty-six, through the next eighteen months, were marked by four significant private revelations from our Lord. In the first, Jesus told her: "I now call you the beloved disciple of my Sacred Heart." In the second, he gave her a vision of his Sacred Heart, enthroned on flames, surrounded by a crown of thorns, and surmounted by a cross. In the third, he asked her to make loving reparation to his Sacred Heart by frequent and loving Holy Communions, especially on each First Friday, and by an hour-long vigil of prayer every Thursday night in memory of his agony. In this vision, Jesus also told her to fully obey her superior. This was agonizing, because her superior did not allow her to carry out the devotions Jesus had instructed her to do. In her overwrought state, she fell ill. Her superior decided to test the validity of the visions by asking her to pray for a cure, which would be a sign of God's favor. She became well immediately. In 1675, shortly after the Feast of Corpus Christi (now known in English as the Feast of the Body and Blood of Christ), Margaret Mary had a fourth vision, in which Jesus asked that she seek to have instituted a feast of reparation on the Friday after the octave of (eight days following) the Feast of Corpus Christi.

However, nothing happened immediately. Two years later, our Lord asked Margaret Mary to undergo one additional trial, to become a sacrificial victim for the sins and lack of devotion of her sisters in religion and for ingratitude to his Sacred Heart in general. She agreed to do this only with great reluctance and fear. She knelt before the members of her community and told them what she had been asked to do. She had only been a member of the community for seven years and, while some of the nuns took her announcement with humility and great repentance,

others harbored resentment against her for years. As a final humiliation, her superior asked Margaret Mary to describe her revelations to local theologians, who concluded that she was delusional and suggested that she eat better. Not long afterward, however, St. Claude La Colombière, a Jesuit priest, was temporarily assigned as confessor to the convent. He believed her, respected her, and developed an affection for her. Soon thereafter he left for England, but in 1681 he came back, ill, dying within a year. She felt that she had utterly failed in her mission.

When Margaret Mary was thirty-six, a new superior was elected who, for the first time, was a friend. She appointed Margaret Mary as assistant superior. The following year, a book written by St. Claude was read aloud during the convent meals, without anyone knowing in advance that it recounted her visions. Learning of their acceptance

by a man all regarded as saintly, the whole community finally embraced them as true. Following her appointment as novice mistress, the novices themselves chose to celebrate, for the first time, the Feast of the Sacred Heart. In 1686 the entire convent kept the feast.

After Margaret Mary's death, devotion to the Sacred Heart gradually spread throughout France and to other parts of Europe. Seventy-five years after she died, the Feast of the Sacred Heart was celebrated in Rome, and in 1856 the feast was placed on the calendar of the universal Church. In 1929 it was elevated to a solemnity.

Margaret Mary's revelations added nothing new to the deposit of faith, since devotion to Jesus' Sacred Heart had existed for centuries in the Church. Instead, her role was to make this devotion more widespread so as to counter the cold rigorism of the heresy of Jansenism, which had spread throughout France. She always emphasized that the object of devotion was not the physical heart of Jesus, but his person. She once wrote: "This divine heart is an abyss of all blessings, and into it the poor should submerge all their needs. It is an abyss of joy in which all of us can immerse our sorrows. It is an abyss of lowliness to counteract our foolishness, an abyss of love to meet our every need."

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