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PRAYING TO THE SACRED HEART OF JESUS

OR

HEAVEN AND HOW TO GET THERE

By D.B. Knox

"The Protestant Faith"

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I have in my hand a single page pamphlet a little smaller than an ordinary envelope which has been distributed widely in a southern suburb of Sydney in the last week or two. It is a Roman Catholic pamphlet printed in Sydney and has the imprimatur of the local Roman Catholic authorities and so it may be taken as an example of what is being taught and propagated in the Roman Catholic Church in Australia to-day. On the front is a representation of our Lord Jesus Christ holding His heart exposed to view and under the picture a prayer "May the sacred heart of Jesus be everywhere loved for ever" and under that, in brackets, "300 days indulgence". Two comments may be made. First, with regard to the 300 days indulgence promised to those who pray this prayer, this, of course, springs from the Roman Catholic doctrine that Christians who die in the grace of God go to purgatory rather than heaven, unless they have been extraordinarily good. Purgatory is regularly taught for example by St Thomas Aquinas, to be a place of torment, the pains of which are the same as those of hell. But it needs to be said again and again that the Bible has nothing to say about the existence of purgatory. Neither Jesus nor any of His apostles mentioned the place, which would be extraordinary if it really existed; nor is there any reason why a Christian should need to go to purgatory to have his sins cleansed away, for as we read in 1 John 1:9, "The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin".

There is no mention of purgatory anywhere in the Bible. On the contrary the Bible speaks quite differently of the death of a Christian. It teaches that those who trust Christ in this life will at death go straight to be with Him. As St. Paul puts it "absent from the body, present with the Lord". Nothing could be clearer. So when we think of death the Scriptures teach that our sorrow is to be tempered by the sure promise of God that at death those who trust in Christ go to be with Him in Paradise. The doctrine of purgatory is a doctrine of fear, but the New Testament teaches the Christian to face death with peace in his heart, because death has lost its sting for those who are trusting in the blood of Jesus. There is then no place for the amassing of indulgences in an attempt to shorten time in an imaginary purgatory.

A second observation may be made with regard to the content of the prayer printed underneath the picture: "May the sacred heart of Jesus be everywhere loved for ever". This is an example of Roman Catholic devotion to the heart of Jesus, that is to the bodily organ in His body. The error here is that Christians do not worship the body of Christ which is human and created, but the person of Jesus. It is Jesus the Son of God whom we worship, not His body or parts of His body. Nor is His love for us (which the heart may be said to symbolise) to be isolated as an object of devotion in itself, but rather Jesus Christ is to be thanked for His love shown in His death for us; and the devotion we are to give Him is not so much pious thoughts about His body and its parts, but rather, faith in that death and loving obedience to Him Himself.

The Christian religion is a religion of fellowship with our Saviour and this fellowship is not strengthened but rather hindered if we make the object of our devotion not Jesus Himself but parts of His body such as His heart.

Devotion to the bodily organ, the heart of Jesus, developed in the Roman Catholic Church in the seventeenth century. It is based on visions seen by a French nun named Margaret Mary. I quote from the Catholic Encyclopaedia, Vol 9, page 653: "From early childhood Margaret showed intense love for the blessed sacrament and preferred silence and prayer to childish amusements. After her first communion at the age of nine, she practiced in secret severe corporal mortifications until paralysis confined her to bed for four years. At the end of this period having made a vow to the blessed virgin to consecrate herself to the religious life, she was instantly restored to health." The encyclopaedia goes on to relate how Margaret saw visions of Christ on several occasions. It relates how her Mother besought her to take part in secular life, so that, "Still bleeding from a self-imposed austerity she began to take part in the pleasures of the world. One night upon her return from a ball she had visions of Christ as He was during the scourging reproaching her for infidelity." As a consequence she entered a nunnery. It was there that Margaret had many further revelations. I quote from the Catholic Encyclopaedia Vol 7, page 166: "The following apparitions are specially remarkable: When Jesus permitted Margaret Mary to rest her head upon His heart, and the great apparition when He said 'Behold the heart ... which has so loved men!'. Some of the contents of these revelations are summarised on the pamphlet of which I speak and which was recently distributed in Sydney. Thus on the back we read the following: "Promises made by our Lord

Jesus Christ to Margaret Mary in favour of those who practice devotion to His sacred heart". Twelve promises are printed, and they cover almost every possible desire both spiritual and material. For example, the first is "I will give them all the graces necessary for their state of life." The second, "I will establish peace in their families", and another "I will shed abundant blessings on all their undertakings". Now it is most important that we should know the promises God has made to us because we should base our whole life on God's promises. On the other hand, it is equally important that we should not include among the true promises of God, promises which have no real basis in God's word. For then we will be found to be putting our faith on something which is mere quicksands and not the rock of God's Word.

With regard to the promises printed on the back of the pamphlet, may be noted not only the all inclusive nature of the promises, but also the complete lack of foundation for these promises. They are based on visions of a highly wrought nun, of which even the Catholic Encyclopedia states (on page 164 of vol.7) "Margaret Mary's visions could be false". Nevertheless the pamphlet states that they are promises made by our Lord Jesus Christ. The reader is misled into thinking that they have the authority of the Word of God and so are ground for complete trust. But they have no other ground than these visions which the encyclopedia admits may be false. It is wrong to ask people to put their faith for blessings in this life and hereafter, in promises which are uncertain.

The Christian life is a life of faith in God's Word, but if we put our faith in that which is not God's Word then faith becomes mere superstition. The last promise on the pamphlet is perhaps the most significant, where Jesus is said to say "I promise.... that my all-powerful love will grant to those who receive communion on the first Friday of every month for nine consecutive months, THE GRACE OF FINAL PERSEVERANCE; THEY SHALL NOT DIE UNDER MY DIS- PLEASURE nor without receiving the sacraments". The central words of this promise about certainty in going to heaven, are printed in capitals to draw attention to their importance.

We are reminded that Roman Catholics are taught that they can have no assurance of going to heaven. This is because it is taught that entry to Heaven is dependent, not on Christ's death alone, but also on one's own merits, and ofcourse no-one can know for sure whether he has these. The New Testament, however, teaches us to

be fully assured of our salvation, for the simple reason that our salvation and our going to heaven, does not depend on our own merits but only on what Christ has done for us, which ofcourse is perfect, and on our relationship to Him through faith. Ofcourse it is important that a Christian should live a good life, but this is a consequence of our salvation. It is not the ground of it nor the assurance of it. Christ's death for us is the only ground of our hope for heaven, but it is a more than sufficient ground; so that as long as we are looking towards Him in faith, trusting in His death, we have full assurance of salvation. But on Roman Catholic teaching, which makes salvation depend on our merit, such full assurance is impossible. However, naturally, Roman Catholics, like everyone else, would like to know that they are going to heaven. Indeed for a conscientious soul, fully aware of his own sinfulness and of the awfulness of hell, constant uncertainty about one's future state must be terrifying. Hence this particular pamphlet promises assurance, and prints the promise in capitals, but note the ground, not Christ's death, but receiving communion on the first Friday of nine months running, that is, assurance is here grounded on our own merits, on our own religious works of receiving communion, but what is suggested is utterly unworthy and inadequate for such a benefit as Heaven. The capitals show how important the need of assurance is felt to be, yet the ground offered is baseless. The promise is not rooted in God's Word but in the human imagination of a nun, and the suggested ground of our hope is not Christ and his finished work, but ourselves, and our own religious efforts. It is a fatal error to distract the attention of religious people from the true promises of God contained in the Bible and to direct their faith towards false promises so that their faith becomes superstition. Yet we are all interested in knowing where we will go if we were to die tonight. Jesus's promise is clear in John 6:40 "This is the will of my Father that everyone that beholds the Son and believes on Him should have eternal life and I will raise him up at the last day". The Bible abounds in such promises, but one would be sufficient! For it is clear, and certain, and made to everyone "This is the will of my Father that everyone that beholds the Son and believes on Him should have eternal life and I will raise him up at the last day". As we ask ourselves the question where would I go if I died tonight, we should ask ourselves the further question, do we believe really and truly on the Lord Jesus Christ? Is He our Lord? For if so, He promises that we will never perish, nor will anyone pluck us out of His

hand. He promises to give us eternal life and to raise us up at the last day and that where He is, there will we be also. Here is a sure ground of assurance for the future, rooted in the real words of Christ and in the power and purpose of God and as we think of this promise taken from the Bible, it should fill us with peace and joy and thankfulness.

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