



WEEKLY LETTER FROM MONSIGNOR KEN

Did you ever hear of Jansenism? It was a heresy in the seventeenth-century whose legacy was pessimism and despair. Like most heresies, it was a distortion of the truth. Its fundamental error was its incorrect understanding of God. Its three main tenets involved a belief in double pre-destination, an incomplete understanding of contrition, and a resulting discouragement of receiving Communion.

A full treatment of this heresy is beyond these few paragraphs, but it does what many are tempted to do, take a kernel of truth and bend it in a wrong direction. We need God's grace for salvation, but the Jansenist believed God chose to give some people grace, but refused it to others, condemning them with no chance of redemption. We need true contrition to be forgiven, but they undervalued our all too human imperfect contrition combined with the power of sacramental grace in Confession. The result of those imbalances was to literally frighten people away from receiving Communion, as hopelessly unworthy.

God, Himself, came to the rescue, appearing to St. Margaret Mary Alacoque to promote devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. While this devotion was always around, those appearances to this saint helped spread the devotion and counter the despair of Jansenism with the proclamation of God's love expressed through the heart of His Son. More than proclamations from popes, apparitions of the Sacred Heart brought about the end of Jansenism. While the heresy may have been partially right in that sin is real and offends God and that we can be indifferent and apathetic, its response was misleading and discouraging. Like the message of Divine Mercy two centuries later, the message of the Sacred Heart reminds us that God's response is not wrath, but an invitation to experience and embrace His love.

This past week, providentially, the bishops of the United States, in union with Catholics throughout the country, in celebration of our 250th anniversary, consecrated this nation to the Sacred Heart. The act of consecration is a humble prayer entrusting our nation into the hands of God. This consecration is made by people of faith, on behalf of all people, even those without faith or even those who oppose faith. It is an act of reparation for sins committed against the love of God, especially opposition to life and justice.

In consecrating our nation to the Sacred Heart, I also think it is a rejection of the error of the perfectionism contained in Jansenism. That heresy created the idea of an elite, select group that looks down upon and condemns the rest of sinful humanity. God doesn't seek perfection but sincerity and service. Even in our nation, there are those who believe we cannot celebrate our 250th anniversary because we are not perfect. As in the spiritual life, that kind of expectation is unbalanced and unhealthy. No person is perfect. No nation is perfect. No parish is perfect.

To reject Jansenism and to embrace devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, is to embrace hope. It is a commitment to constantly seek to build the kingdom of God on earth, striving each day to be better and more committed to working together, not in opposition.

In his encyclical, *Miserentissimus Redemptor* (On Reparation to the Sacred Heart), Pope Pius XI spoke of our Lord's promise to be with us: "These words, which are indeed most pleasing, are a cause of all hope and security, and they bring us, Venerable Brethren, ready succor, whenever we look round from this watch-tower raised on high and see all human society laboring amid so many evils and miseries, and the Church herself beset without ceasing by attack and machinations...For as in olden time when mankind came forth from Noah's ark, God set His 'bow in the clouds,' (Genesis 9:13) shining as the sign of a friendly covenant; so in the most turbulent times of a more recent age, when the Jansenist heresy, the most crafty of them all, hostile to love and piety towards God, was creeping in and preaching that God was not to be loved as a father but rather to be feared as an implacable judge; then the most benign Jesus showed his own most Sacred Heart to the nations lifted up as a standard of peace and charity portending no doubtful victory in the combat." Consecration to the Sacred Heart is a rejection of pessimism, negativity and division, and an embrace of hope, faith and charity.

"But when they came to Jesus and saw that He was already dead, they did not break His legs, but one soldier thrust his lance into His side, and immediately blood and water flowed out." (John 19:33-34)