

London, the Sacred Heart and St. Claude de la Colombière

K.V. Turley

The devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus served as a counter to the heresies of Protestantism and Jansenism



Two years ago, and quite by accident, I saw St. Claude de la Colombière arrive back on the streets of London some 340 years after he had left them.

The occasion was the 2016 return of the saint's relics to two churches in central London: the Church of the Immaculate Conception, Mayfair, and St. Patrick's Church, Soho Square. It was the latter I visited one evening on my way home. As I left St. Patrick's quiet interior I heard noises on the street and looking up saw what seemed to be a crowd approaching. It was, in fact, a procession, not less than the return of the relics of St. Claude to London, a city where he had lived for three years from 1676 to 1679. The saint was accompanied not just by those

whom I could see, but also, by the relics of another saint, St. Margaret Mary Alacoque.

Catholic churches throughout the world have a statue of the Sacred Heart. Many Catholics say the prayer: "O Sacred Heart of Jesus, I place all my trust in you." This devotion which is key to the spirituality of many Catholics throughout the world owes its modern origin to St. Margaret Mary who lived in 17th century France at a time of rebellion both from outside the Church – Protestantism – and from within – Jansenism. The devotion she was to spread would counter both these heresies.

From late December 1673, St. Margaret Mary, a nun living at the Visitation convent at Paray-le-Monial, experienced a series of revelations that called her to spread devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. As could be expected, such visions of Our Lord and her subsequent claims did not meet with universal acceptance amongst her community or its spiritual guides. She suffered greatly as a result. One priest, however, did believe her. In fact, he was utterly convinced of the authenticity of what was being revealed. His name was Fr. Claude de la Colombière.

Claude de la Colombière was born in 1641 in France, and entered the Society of Jesus in 1658. He was appointed Superior of the Jesuit community in the village of Paray-le-Monial in 1675. As spiritual director to the local Visitation Convent he met St. Margaret Mary. Fr. Claude offered her guidance as to the meaning of her spiritual visions of the Sacred Heart. In so doing, he also became a zealous apostle of this new manifestation of an ancient devotion to the Heart of Jesus and what is signified, namely the love of God for each and every one.

God's ways are not our ways though, and no sooner had St. Claude met St. Margaret Mary than he was assigned another mission. He was sent to the Court of St. James's in London, and, in particular, to the ambassadorial post of chaplain to the Duchess of York, Mary of Modena, unusually Royal and Catholic in a city and country openly hostile to the Church.

Whatever France's problems at the time, the England of the late 1600s was a place still less inclined to learning of a new Catholic devotion. In fact, Catholicism at the time was outlawed. St. Claude's ministry was to be restricted to the Duchess of York, the future wife of King James II.

To some extent, the three years St. Claude was in London are shrouded in mystery. There were

his official tasks ministering at the Royal Court. But there were stories of other pastoral service that he carried out to the beleaguered Catholics of London. In addition to sermons in the palace chapel at St. James and the tireless spiritual direction he offered, both spoken and through letters, not least to St. Margaret Mary, St. Claude dedicated his time to dispensing the sacraments and to reconciling to the Church those who had abandoned it. He wrote of this time: “I could write a book about the mercy of God that I've seen Him exercise since I arrived here!”

Through the ministry of St. Claude, the Sacred Heart was showering mercy upon London; London was to show very little but contempt to the French Jesuit. Falsely implicated in the completely fictitious “Popish Plot” of 1678, St. Claude was to be imprisoned for weeks at King’s Bench Prison in Southwark, just south of London Bridge. By virtue of his position at court and his French citizenship his life was spared, but, nonetheless, he was expelled from England in 1679. He was never to return, nor did his health. The period of imprisonment in an English jail was to hasten his early death some three years later in 1682. He was aged just 41 years old.

In London there is no shrine to the saint who once walked its streets, often at night to avoid detection. And although statues of the Sacred Heart are as omnipresent in London’s Catholic churches as elsewhere, there are few pictures or statues to the saint who brought to London the first news of this renewal of an ancient devotion.

As I write this, however, I am struck that there are two areas of London associated with St. Claude: the first in what is loosely termed the West End, and the other is near Borough High Street, south of the river Thames. Today, built many years after his time in this city, there stands in London’s West End the church of Corpus Christi, dedicated to the Body of Christ; to the south, near where St. Claude was imprisoned, there is now a church dedicated to the Precious Blood. Together they symbolise a Heart – one made of both flesh and blood – and one that is as Sacred as it is Merciful.