



What does it mean to have an Immaculate Heart?

When you love someone, you want to know them deeply. You want to know their heart and admire all the good you find in them.

I love the determined heart of my husband, the fiery heart of my 21-year-old son, the kind heart of my 19-year-old son, the generous heart of my 17-year-old daughter, the strong heart of my 15-year-old, the noble heart of my 11-year-old, and the creative heart of my 9-year-old.

Christ has shown me his heart by loving me. His beautiful, strong, sacred, passionate, merciful, holy heart.

**Mary our mother has always been venerated for her Immaculate Heart.** But what does that mean? Until a few years ago, the idea of Mary's immaculate heart held up to my not-so-immaculate heart intimidated me. I found it difficult to relate to someone so perfect, and I was sure she would find it difficult to relate to me.

But as Jesus drew me closer to himself in my spiritual life, somehow he also drew me closer to Mary. The nearer I came to her, the more I doubted my assumption (pardon the pun) that her immaculate heart was a plain, blank, non-descript heart that was as cold and white as the statues in Rome. I started to know her as a very real, living mother in my life, and my experience of her love didn't match my ideas of what the Immaculate Heart meant. Loving her, I wanted to know her heart. I discovered it as vibrant, beautiful and warm, not stone-cold perfect.

Here are five things I have discovered and come to love about Mary's Immaculate Heart.

## **A Heart of Mercy**

In her Immaculate Conception, Mary is a recipient of the complete mercy of God. Her creation was bathed in mercy. It is in her spiritual DNA. She is the Mother of Mercy (Jesus Christ), but also the mother of Mercy (a merciful mother). The perfection she has is not a trophy that she holds up over the heads of all of us who are sinners, it's a gift she desires to share with all of us, a hope of the perfection in mercy that we can one day have in Heaven. Mary leads us to Mercy (Do whatever he tells you to, John 2:5), and leads Mercy to us (they have no wine, John 2:3).

Mary was the perfect recipient of the merciful love of God, and her Immaculate Heart teaches me to be open to his mercy to, to let him love me and transform me.

## **A Heart that Adores**

The surge of the heart that a mother experiences when she gazes on her child is one of the most profound and simple experiences of human love. Mary gazed on Jesus with this love as he lay in the manger, as a child, as a teenager, as a man, and as the crucified God-man. Mary gazed on her son in the Eucharist after the resurrection, and with delicate generosity, invites us to join her in that gaze. She quietly welcomes us to be with her in that intimate moment of prayer every time we are before the Blessed Sacrament, her son. When we adore Christ like Mary does, our hearts are transformed by mercy too, making them more immaculate, more like hers.

Her Immaculate Heart teaches us how to receive God's love and to adore him. It also teaches us to see and adore Christ in people around us, his living tabernacles, pondering his goodness in our hearts.

## **A Heart that Suffers**

Even being perfect doesn't protect us from suffering. Mary didn't 'deserve' suffering, but she experienced so much of it. That insight teaches us to look at suffering in a new way. We can see it as less of a punishment and more of a gift and a mission. It is a gift because when we suffer with Christ, we join him in his most intimate love, and he draws us very close to himself.

When Mary suffered, she didn't cower and tremble like a scared and defeated victim. She trusted the strength of the Love that created and redeemed her and bore her suffering with his strength. She suffered with the heart of a mother, willing to take on anything that her love for her son requires, suffering more because he suffers than because she does. Mary's suffering was a suffering of compassion, suffering with. It was part of her mission. She still suffers with us, and walks with us through all of the

torments in our lives, reminding us to raise our eyes to Jesus, and begging him to care for us.

Mary's Immaculate Heart teaches how to us to suffer our own challenges, and those of others, to be compassionate, and to keep our gazes locked in Christ's, asking him to help us in our suffering.

### **A Heart filled with the Holy Spirit**

At my children's confirmations, the bishop has always reminded them to have the disposition of openness to receive the Holy Spirit in the sacrament, to welcome him with his gifts. Mary's immaculate conception made her heart perfectly disposed to receive the Holy Spirit when he came upon her at the Annunciation. He dwells in her heart, and her heart is characterized by everything that He is; love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal 5:22).

Mary's immaculate heart is not a plain white canvas, but a vibrant tapestry woven by the gifts of the Holy Spirit. St. Irenaeus said, "The glory of God is man fully alive." Mary is this fully alive human being. She didn't sit alone in her perfection but lived a passionate, dynamic missionary life. She laughed with perfect joy, she prayed with perfect peace, she lived pro-active kindness. Her perfection is not boring, her perfection is the beautiful fullness of the human experience as God intends it.

Mary's Immaculate Heart teaches me to be bravely open to the Holy Spirit and his gifts, letting them live in my heart and in my life.

### **A Heart that Serves**

Mary's Immaculate Heart does not carry a trophy, but a towel (John 13:1-17). She echoes the humility of her Son, who came not to be served but to serve. After the Annunciation, Mary's haste to serve Elizabeth was like a wind at her back, propelling her out to care for the needs of her cousin. Her Immaculate Heart is selfless and impels her

to be a gift of self to God and others. St. John Paul II taught in his Letter to Families that “Every man and every woman fully realizes himself or herself through the sincere gift of self.” Mary lived as a gift of self to her son and others and invites us to do the same.

There can be a temptation, even in service, to put ourselves first. St. Jose Maria Escriva said, “what a pity if in the end you had carried out your apostolate and not God’s!” I think one of the reasons it can be hard to get to know Mary is because she doesn’t say much in the Gospels. Reflecting on this, I realized that it was because Mary is not about herself. Her life was a gift of self, poured out for others. She didn’t have her own mission or plan, except to be a mother (which is huge but not centered on her). She was simply THERE where God wanted her, serving and loving whoever God asked her to. Mary’s humility made her life something poured out for others, not for her own projects. Breathtaking humility, from the only perfect human being born of man and woman.

**Mary’s Immaculate Heart teaches me to put myself aside and to love. She leads me to give myself 24/7 for Christ and for others with joy and humility, living my mission as a servant.**