

DEVOTION TO THE SACRED HEART

BY

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DEVOTION to the Sacred Heart is perhaps the most popular devotion of modern times, and in its present form it may be said to date from the revelations made by our Lord to St Margaret Mary in the 17th century. But though so 'modern' it is as old as the Gospels. Our Lord himself taught the Apostles, 'Learn of me for I am meek and humble of heart', and when, after the Resurrection, he invited Thomas to put his hand into his side, the doubting Apostle must surely have felt there the beatings of the heart of whom he forthwith confessed to be his Lord and his God. St John, who leaned upon the Lord's breast at the Last Supper, and who has left us in his Gospel some account of the secrets he learned there, also describes how the soldier opened our Saviour's side as he hung dead on the cross, so that blood and water gushed forth, and it has always been the belief of saints and commentators that the lance pierced the heart too. These things have attracted the great contemplatives of every age—Saints Augustine, Bernard, Bonaventure, Gertrude, Mechtilde, Catherine of Siena, to mention only a few, all of whom lived several centuries before St Margaret Mary was chosen to popularise this devotion among the faithful in general. But while our Lord's appeal to her has been heard, and his Sacred Heart is honoured by millions of souls, it seems that many of them have an inadequate, if not even an inaccurate idea of the devotion which they practise, and that few, perhaps, penetrate so deeply into the 'secret of the heart' as did those Saints of earlier ages.

St Augustine would have called the Sacred Heart a 'sacrament' in the broad sense of the word, for it is a visible expression and symbol of an invisible reality, and the equivalent Greek word 'mysterium' reminds us that this reality pertains to the 'hidden things of the Son', the deep mysteries of the divine life which were hidden from the foundation of the world and which the created mind can never fully fathom: '*Ut dum visibiliter Deum cognoscimus, per hunc in invisibilem amorem rapiamur*'. But because man receives all his knowledge through the senses, he is always in danger of stopping at the visible symbol and of missing the invisible reality to which it points and of which it is the expression, and so in this case the Church, in her wisdom, has forbidden the representation of the heart of Christ apart from his divine Person.

For all devotion to any part of the sacred humanity, the five

wounds, the precious blood, the soul of Christ, is devotion to the whole person, and all devotion to the person of Christ is devotion to the divinity to which that humanity is united in the intimacy of the hypostatic union: 'When the faithful adore the heart of the Saviour, they do not isolate it from the divinity, they adore the heart of the person of the Word to which it is inseparably united'. (*Denzinger*, 1563).

The heart of man is regarded as the seat of the affections and the will, as the fount of life and the symbol of love, and in the sacred humanity, the most perfect human organism ever formed, the Sacred Heart represents all these functions. Suffering and sorrow are attributed to the heart, and as the cult of the Sacred Heart has become in our day predominantly one of reparation. 'Console thou me' has been addressed by our Saviour to many of the saints, and the thought of the agony he has caused the heart of his God has wrought the conversion of many a sinner.

But there is danger here. The heart of Christ is not a dead relic like the heart of a saint. It is the heart of the risen Christ, who sits in glory at the right hand of the Father, in the abode of the blessed where suffering and sorrow no longer exist. It beats in a glorified body which is incapable of suffering, mental or physical. Consequently any revelations which speak of grief and sorrow on the part of Christ—or for that matter of our blessed Lady, or any of the saints—must be understood in a mystical sense. Because Christ is God he lives in the eternal 'now', and when he suffered and died all men were present to him. It was as if, in the persons of the persecutors and executioners, the sin and sinners of all time inflicted those sufferings on him, while the saints and just of all time consoled and comforted him in the persons of his Mother and the faithful few who followed him even to Calvary. (Perhaps the consolation afforded by the Angel in the garden may have consisted partly in a reminder of the 'compassion' of all his lovers throughout the ages). Our own Mother Julian of Norwich, about whose devotion to the Sacred Heart more will be said, understood this truth very clearly. (cf. *Revelations*, cc. 18, 77).

But besides the human Christ there is the mystical Christ, Christ in his members who 'fill up what is wanting in his sufferings'. He has said that whatever is done to the least of them is done to him. Compassion for them in their troubles is indeed compassion for him, and charity towards our neighbour is perhaps the only sure way of proving our love for God. St Catherine of Siena is continually insisting on this truth, and it was after the miraculous exchange of hearts, when our Lord had taken away hers and replaced it by his own, that she left her hidden life of loving and contemplating God, to become a

martyr of love in the service of her neighbour, of the Church, the 'sweet Spouse of Christ', and of the pope whom she called the 'sweet Christ on earth'. A great love and compassion for the Holy Father should be the natural expression of devotion to the Sacred Heart.

We worship God, as St Thomas reminds us (II-II. 81.7), not for his sake, for we can add nothing to his essential glory, and he has no need of any other, but for our own, since by our worship we unite and submit ourselves to him, and in this our perfection consists. St Gertrude in a vision asked the Beloved Disciple why he had not spoken of the mysteries of the Sacred Heart as he had of those of the uncreated Word, and he replied that 'the sweet eloquence of the throbbings of the heart of Christ was reserved for the time when the world has grown old and has become cold in God's love, that it may regain fervour by hearing such a revelation'. (*Revelations of St Gertrude*, Bk. IV, c. 4). All save the most hardened hearts are moved to pity by the sight of suffering, and we can see in our Lord's plea for reparation, an instance of the divine condescension in adapting graces to the littleness and weakness of the creature.

For the heart not only suffers, it also rejoices and, while suffering is proper to man in his fallen state, joy is an aspect of the life of God. The human heart of Christ suffered during its mortal life, but it also rejoiced, and now, when its sorrows are at an end, it lives in the joy of the Lord which nothing can cloud. The sensibility of Christ responded to every human joy which gladdens the heart of man, and still more to those spiritual joys which make saints the happiest of mortals even in the midst of trials and contradictions. And because his holy soul enjoyed the Beatific Vision, his Sacred Heart also possessed that beatitude which is the essential joy of heaven, though at times, as during the Passion, he miraculously suspended the overflow of this joy to his human sensibility.

Even St Margaret Mary, who may be called the apostle of reparation, was reminded by a vision of the Seraphim that 'Love triumphs, love enjoys, the love of the Sacred Heart rejoices', and she was asked to form a partnership whereby the Angels should suffer in her person and she rejoice in and with them, thus offering to the Sacred Heart a perpetual homage of love, adoration and praise. (*Autobiography of St Margaret Mary*, p. 113). With many of the older mystics the contemplation of the Sacred Heart rejoicing seems to have been uppermost. St Gertrude perceived a twofold movement of that Heart, the first effecting the salvation of sinners, the second that of the just. 'By the second movement of my heart, I invite my Father to rejoice with me for having poured forth my Precious Blood so efficaciously for the just in whose merits I find so many delights' (*op. cit.*, Bk. 3, c. XLIII). Mother Julian begins her chapter on the revelation of the

Sacred Heart with the words: 'Then with glad cheer our Lord looked unto his side and beheld rejoicing. . . .' She declares that he showed her his 'blissful heart, cloven in two', and that he invited her 'for my love enjoy now with me'; and she concludes: 'This shewed our good Lord for to make us glad and merry'. It is worthy of note that the Introit of the original Mass of the Sacred Heart in the Dominican rite, and the Chapter at Vespers and Lauds, are those verses from the Canticle of Canticles which speak of 'the day of the joy of his heart', while all the Psalms at Matins save the first (the 21st) and the last (the 85th) are psalms of joy and exultation.

The aspect of devotion to the Sacred Heart leads deeper into the 'mysterium', for as St Thomas says, joy is an effect of love, and the heart is above all the symbol of love. When our Lord appeared to St Margaret Mary, he showed her his heart and said: 'Behold the heart which has so loved men', and Mother Julian declares that 'He shewed his blissful heart cloven in two, saying "Lo, how I loved thee".' '*Imago bonitatis suae*' is the phrase used in the Collect for the Feast of the Sacred Heart.

Love, as St Thomas insists, is a gift. It even 'has the nature of the first gift—*habet rationem primi doni*—in virtue whereof all free gifts are given'. (I. 38. 2). It is the source and motive of all that is given while being itself the greatest gift of all, since it implies the gift of self. Thus the Sacred Heart symbolises that love which inspired and expressed itself in all that he did for men, and in all that he gave to men. His life on earth, his preaching and miracles, all the supernatural treasures he has bestowed on us, our redemption, his abiding presence in the blessed Sacrament, all these are but expressions of that total gift of himself which he has made by loving us. 'He loved me, and delivered himself for me'. And as if to demonstrate how this love emptied itself of all and as it were broke itself in an effort to convince us that nothing which could be given was kept back, when the sacred humanity had shed its blood and given its life, the lifeless heart was pierced, and from it flowed blood and water. The mystery of that wound, the 'wound of love' as the Church calls it, can never be fully fathomed or expressed, but the mystics are agreed that in some mysterious way it forms a gateway through which man enters into the abyss of divine love, and a shelter wherein all mankind can dwell, safe from every evil which threatens them. Thus St Catherine says: 'Let your place of refuge be Christ Crucified, my only-begotten Son: dwell and hide yourselves in the cavern of his side where you will taste through love for his humanity, my divine nature'. (*Dialogue*, ch. 124).

But it remains only a gateway, for however immeasurable and incomprehensible the human love of Christ may be, it is only the

created image, the finite channel and instrument of that infinite Love which is the life and being of the Blessed Trinity. 'And with this sweet enjoying he shewed unto mine understanding, in part, the Blessed Godhead, stirring then the poor soul to undersand . . . i.e. to think on the endless Love that was without beginning, and is, and shall be ever'. (Mother Julian, *Revelations*, c. 24).

God is love, and his love of his own goodness is the reason why he has created other things to participate in that goodness. 'All his works whatever are love alone, for they are not wrought of anything save love'. (St Catherine). The whole explanation of man's life and destiny is to be found only in God's love for him, and the mystery of that love is revealed and symbolised in the Heart of Love Incarnate. 'Lo how I loved thee! I have loved thee with an everlasting love, therefore have I drawn thee, taking pity on thee . . .' 'God so loved the world as to give his only Son . . .' Predestination—'ere God made us he loved us' (Mother Julian, c. 86); 'God has known creatures eternally in their proper natures, and for that reason has loved them'. (I. 15. 2 ad 2): the redemption—'The pain (of the Passion) was a wonderful deed done in time by the working of love; and love was without beginning and shall be without ending' (Mother Julian, c. 22); even the mysteries of pain and evil have their explanation in the love of God for man 'in which love he hath wrought *all* his works'. That is the secret hidden from the foundation of the world, and revealed in and through the heart of the Son of God; that God is Love, that he has eternally loved man with this infinite love which is his very life and being, and that he became man so that this Love might express itself in a human manner which the mind and heart of man could easily understand.

'He loved me . . .' God loves man. Calvary and the holy Eucharist show to what limits that love would go. But he loves man only because he loves himself, because by a single eternal act he loves himself and every creature, which is only insofar as it participates in the divine Goodness; and it is the love of God which imparts to it its share in that Goodness. Love is the life of the Blessed Trinity. It is the life of the Person of the Word who said 'I am the Life', and who assumed a human body that he might become the life of men. And both as God and as man, if one may so express it, the life of the Word may be summed up in a phrase—to love that Father. 'That the world may know that I love the Father'. First, as God, with the uncreated Love, then as man, with the created love of Charity, as well as with the purely natural affection of the human heart. God is a consuming fire, a fire of love, and the heart of the incarnate God is, in its turn, a 'burning furnace of Charity'. In him the uncreated love of God for God is found in a created nature; in him that love is as it

were translated into human language in that fulness of charity possessed by his holy soul, and of which our charity is but a participation. By and through the heart of Christ a man loves God as he deserves and ought and wills to be loved, and as he loves himself. To many, or perhaps to only too few, this is the most consoling aspect of devotion to the Sacred Heart.

'Is Christ divided?' asked St Paul. The Mystical Christ cannot be separated from the human Christ. As St Thomas points out, the grace of Christ as an individual and as head of the Mystical Body are not two distinct things but the same reality looked at from different aspects. The grace of the head flows down as it were to all the members, the life of the head to vitalise each member. And so with the love of the heart of Christ; that also is meant to burn in the heart of every Christian: 'I am come to cast fire upon the earth, and what will I but that it be enkindled?' . . . 'That the Love wherewith thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them'.

Devotion to the Sacred Heart does not end when we have offered reparation to the sorrowing Christ, nor even when we have adored and praised the 'too great' love of God for his creatures. It is not even sufficient to obey our Lord's injunction to learn of him because he is meek and humble of heart, and to imitate as from a distance the virtues which he exhibits. What is required is an identification with, an assimilation to him, so that, insofar as is humanly possible, his heart becomes ours and ours his; that is, that our heart is so completely surrendered to him that he can use it as if it were his own, so that it becomes so united to his that it has no other sentiments, no other will, no other love save his. Then it is 'one spirit with the Lord, and it has attained to that unity of will with the will of God, which St John of the Cross describes in the *Living Flame of Love* as the summit of the transforming union.

The mystical phenomena which are common in the lives of the great 'Saints of the Sacred Heart' seem to be intended to show forth in a sensible manner these spiritual realities. (It must be remembered, though, that such phenomena are graces *gratis datae*, which do not sanctify the recipient and are not in themselves necessarily an indication of holiness. They may even be produced by natural, or possibly by diabolical agencies. They are bestowed by God either to point to the holiness of the individual, or to symbolise and demonstrate either to the recipient or to others the spiritual realities which they represent.)

The love of God is a consuming fire which purges and burns away the impurities in the soul which gives itself to him, while at the same time imparting to it some of its own burning heat. And so St Margaret Mary saw the Sacred Heart of our Lord as a burning furnace in which

he placed her heart which he had taken from her side, replacing it as a burning flame in the form of a heart. In her account of the incident the Saint adds: 'It produces such heat within me that it burns and consumes me alive'.

The Sacred Heart is also a 'fountain of life and holiness', the 'source of all consolation'. St Margaret Mary, St Catherine and others have been allowed to place their mouth to the wound in the side of Christ, and drink therefrom some precious liquor which filled them with consolation and sweetness (cf. Mother Julian, c. 60). This recalls the blood and water which flowed from our Lord's side on the Cross, which the Fathers, following St Augustine, have usually regarded as representing Baptism and the Holy Eucharist.

In the Sacred Heart are 'hidden all treasures of wisdom and knowledge'; from it one may learn the 'secret of the heart' of which St Catherine often speaks, and which St John surely divulged when he declared that 'God is Love', and which Mother Julian in her turn discovered when, after 20 years' meditation, she understood that 'in this and in all, love was his meaning'. And so others besides St John, St Gertrude for example, have been permitted to lean on the breast of their Lord, and there learn the mysteries which the heart of God teaches, and the heart alone can understand.

Mother Julian as well as St Bernard, St Catherine and St Mechtilde, saw in the wounded side and heart of Christ a refuge from every danger, one large enough to contain 'all mankind that shall be saved'. When the young Nicholas Tuldo had been executed, St Catherine in a vision saw his soul enter into the side of Christ, and she frequently exhorted her disciples to 'hide themselves in the wounded side where they would learn the secret of the heart'.

The supreme symbol of the significance of devotion to the Sacred Heart is found in the life of St Catherine of Siena. Her confessor, Bl. Raymund of Capua, relates that one day as she was praying '*Cor mundum crea in me, Deus*', and begging God to take away her own heart and will, our Lord appeared, opened her left side, and took away her heart. Despite the incredulity and even amusement of her sceptical spiritual father, the Saint insisted that her heart was no longer in her body, and that by a special grace she was able to live without one. Some days later our Lord again appeared bearing in his hand a glowing and resplendent heart which he placed in her side, saying: 'My dearest daughter, just as I took away your heart the other day, so now I give you mine, which will make you live for ever'. Henceforward she was unable to use her favourite ejaculation, 'Lord, I give you my heart', but was always constrained to say '*Thy heart*', and it was after this event that she embarked upon her career of exterior apostolic labours which were certainly more divine than

human, while her spiritual graces and illuminations were even more remarkable than before.

'*Cor mundum crea in me, Deus*', prayed David and many after him, and God has promised through the mouth of the prophet, 'I will take away your heart of stone, and give you a heart of flesh'. God alone can effect this transformation, and yet he will only do it at our request, if we wish it and do what lies in our power to prepare for it. 'My son, give me thy heart'. That is the first stage. We must surrender to him all that we have and are and desire and love—the gift of love, '*quae habet rationem primi doni*'. In virtue of a special grace, some souls are able to make this surrender once and for all, completely and irrevocably, so that, like St Catherine, they can say that they have no heart of their own; but for most of us it will be a very slow and painful process, nature taking back today what grace forced it to relinquish yesterday. But so long as the desire, the will to give all is there, God 'to whom every heart speaks' will understand, and in his own good time will intervene and take away this heart of stone.

'And I will give you a heart of flesh'. No one can exist without a heart; he must live, and living, he must love, and the heart is as it were the source of both life and love. We surrender our own human heart only in order that the heart of Christ, 'King and centre of all hearts', may replace it as it replaced the heart of Catherine. 'The heart of Paul is the heart of Christ', declared St John Chrysostom. As the priest says in the person of Christ, 'This is *my* body', so Christ wishes to be able to say in each individual, 'This is *my* body, this is *my* heart'. That is the very purpose of the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist—the unity of the members with their Head (and consequently with each other). And this is effected because this heavenly Food, instead of being assimilated to them as is the case with natural food, assimilates them to itself. In a very real, if mystical sense, Holy Communion is meant to make us one body with Christ as well as one spirit with the Lord, so that infinite Love which expressed itself in and through the human heart of the incarnate Word, can, so far as is possible without the hypostatic union, take similar possession of our hearts, so completely do they beat in unison with his.

All that the heart of Christ is to God and man, each individual heart is meant in its degree to become, is capable of becoming. A source of love, life, holiness, consolation, adoration—the Litany of the Sacred Heart enumerates many of these things; a *source*, overflowing to others, a fountain springing up unto life everlasting. The greatest contemplatives *must* also be the greatest apostles, because they are beings of love, their being and their life, like those of Christ

and of the blessed Trinity itself, *are* love, and love must give and overflow—'*amor est diffusivus sui*': God's love for God, and God's love for man, symbolised and expressed in human language in and by that heart of God incarnate which has become their heart. A source to which all who thirst may come and drink, to which even God himself will come and drink: '*Sitio; da mihi bibere*. I thirst; give me to drink'. The mystery here is profound and confronts us with the paradox of all God's dealings with men. It is the mystery of divine Wisdom which disposes all things to its own glory and our salvation, which has no need of anything save itself, yet which longs and seeks to be known and understood by men, which *thirsts* for the souls of the creatures it has made; that Wisdom which speaks to the heart and is understood only by the heart, and which became incarnate that man might the more easily have access to its living waters, its torrent of sweetness, its fire of love. It is the 'secret of the heart', which is learnt and understood only by those who rest on the breast of Christ. May we be of their number.