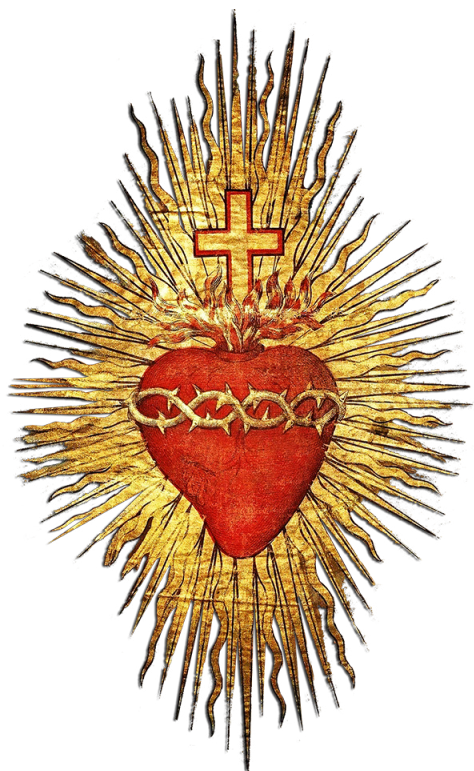
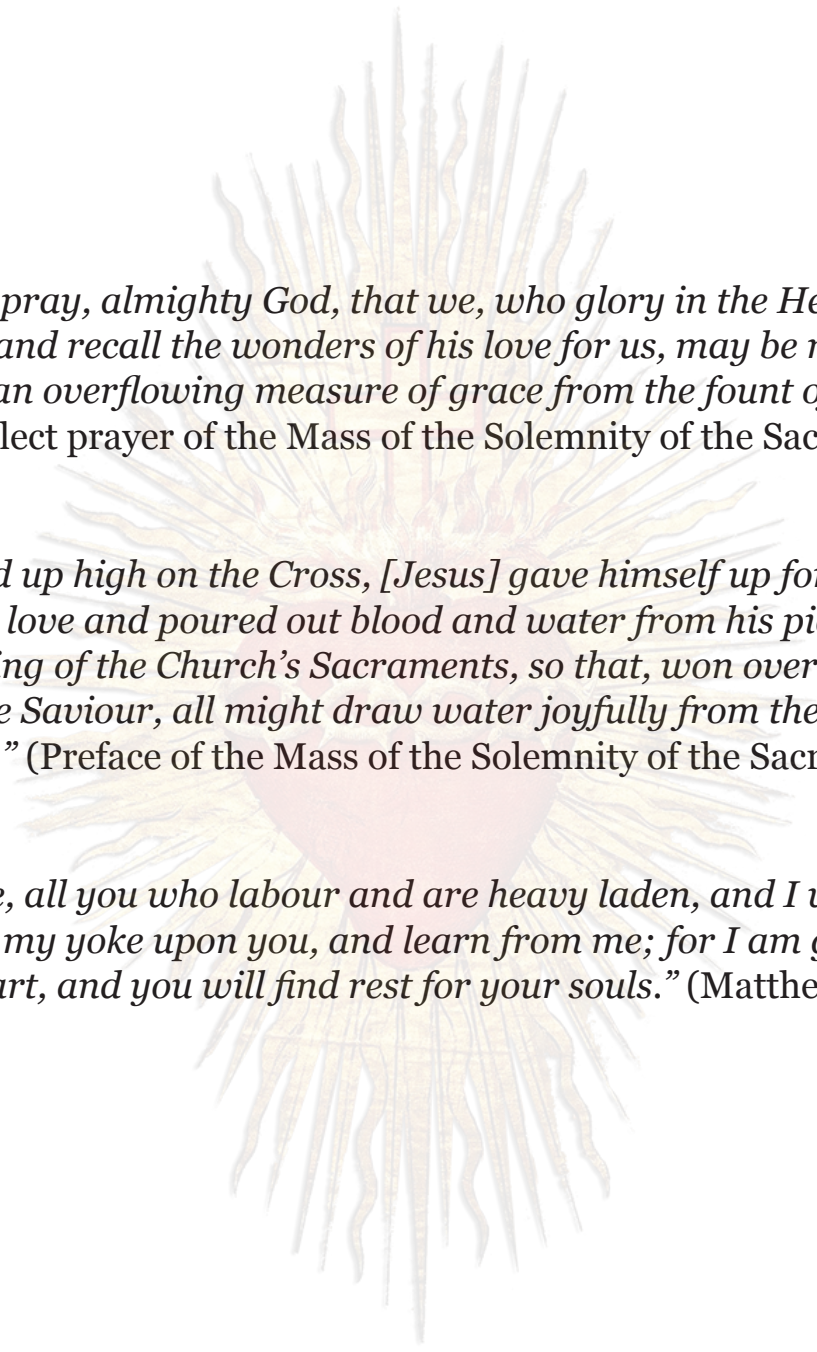




Heart Speaks to Heart

A Pastoral Letter
on the Sacred Heart of Jesus
by Cardinal Thomas Collins
Archbishop of Toronto





“Grant, we pray, almighty God, that we, who glory in the Heart of your beloved Son and recall the wonders of his love for us, may be made worthy to receive an overflowing measure of grace from the fount of heavenly gifts.” (Collect prayer of the Mass of the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart)

“For raised up high on the Cross, [Jesus] gave himself up for us with a wonderful love and poured out blood and water from his pierced side, the wellspring of the Church’s Sacraments, so that, won over to the open heart of the Saviour, all might draw water joyfully from the springs of salvation.” (Preface of the Mass of the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart)

“Come to me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” (Matthew 11:28-29)

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The Need for Devotion to the Sacred Heart

After a year of Covid, we are all heavy laden, and in great need of rest for our souls. The spectre of sickness and death wears us down, as does the devastating effect of pandemic restrictions, which grow ever more burdensome in response to the spread of the virus. Many people are desperately sick in hospitals, and those who serve them grow weary, while even more people see their livelihoods destroyed; the toll of human misery grows ever greater. We are meant for one another, and the unnatural and seemingly unending isolation and distancing can be unbearable. And at a time when spiritual strength is needed most, access to the essential spiritual oxygen of the sacraments is curtailed; that restriction cannot endure for long. In the midst of this grief, we also see extraordinary examples of love and sacrifice, and selfless service to those who are afflicted, but the tensions of our times are starkly before us all.

Quite apart from the pandemic, these are indeed days of suffering, with so much conflict in the world, and such contention in civil society. Across the globe refugees flee oppressive regimes, and the blood of martyrs rebukes us in our comfortable Christianity. In our own country, social trends antagonistic to the Gospel gather strength. Anger mounts in the social media, in political discourse, and sometimes in the streets. Even in the Church, and especially in the Church, we cannot escape from the tides of acrimony.

In the face of all that, we listen even more intently to Our Lord:

“Come to me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”

(Matthew 11:28-29)

There never was a golden age and we, like each generation of Christians, must serve where God has placed us, battered by the wind and the waves, often afraid, but ready to encounter Jesus walking on the stormy waters, saying to us: “Be not afraid.” (John 6:20) Especially in these tempestuous times we have a mission, received in Baptism and Confirmation, to move outward with compassionate love, in the imitation of Christ, to share his healing love.

To be able to do that, however, we need first to go deeper in our own life of faith, through prayer, through meditation on sacred Scripture, especially the

Gospels, and through the sacraments. As the prophet Isaiah says: “with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.” (Isaiah 12:3)

I firmly believe that to give us the guidance and strength required to fulfil our mission as disciples of Jesus more effectively, in a world so much in need of his love, we also need to rediscover a treasure, central to our life in Christ, that is hidden in plain sight in our Catholic spiritual heritage. It seems ever more clear to me that especially in these days we would all do well to focus intently on the symbol of the compassionate love of Christ: the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

And so I am inviting all Catholics in this archdiocese, in all our families, religious communities, parishes, hospitals, schools, and institutions, to focus on the significance of this sign of the sacrificial and compassionate love of Christ, the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and to make devotion to the Sacred Heart a vital part of our life of faith.

II **The Symbol of the Sacred Heart**

We are not angels. We are flesh and blood rational creatures. We always think and imagine and communicate, in this incarnate world, through material signs which point beyond themselves. We require visible signs and symbols that speak to us in our humanity.

That is what the image of the Sacred Heart does. It is a visual sign, an image, that helps us to experience the meaning of the love of Jesus, made manifest especially on Good Friday. It is drawn from Scripture (which itself is the Word of God made flesh in human language), and from our human experience. We must not live abstractly, from the neck up: we need visual symbolism.

The ultimate encounter with divinity in humanity is found in the incarnation of Jesus Christ: “the word became flesh and dwelt among us.” (John 1:14) We continue to encounter Jesus now, in our lives as his disciples, through the sign of language in the Scriptures, and through the signs of matter and words in the Sacraments, which effect what they signify. Those are all acts of God. But the encounter with Jesus in our human life is also experienced in other ways, and especially through the prayerful practices of devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, which engage us personally in the love of Christ among us.

Even in our secular society, **the heart** is the common sign for love, as we see every Valentine’s day. But for a Christian the love signified by the Sacred Heart is

not a passing emotion, but the steady, reliable, faithful, life-giving love which we experience in Jesus as we encounter him in the Gospels, in the Sacraments, and in our life of faith. We are called to imitate that faithful love.

The heart is a natural sign of true love: it is hidden, it is steady, and it is reliable. As it beats, moment by moment, day by day, year by year, it keeps us alive. That is true love, not the sentiment that deceives, nor the passing infatuation that blows away like a cloud. That is the Sacred Heart of Jesus, steady and true, and that is what we must take to heart. Our life of Christian discipleship must be guided by the profound vision of love represented by the Sacred Heart.

The Sacred Heart image shows **the heart as wounded**, and this reminds us of a scriptural foundation of the devotion, the reference in John 19:34 to the lance piercing the side of Christ on the cross. From this verse there developed Christian meditation upon the wounds of Christ, especially the wound to the heart, from which, the Gospel states, flowed blood and water.

Doubting Thomas (John 20:24-29) said that he would not believe unless he put his hands into the wounds of Christ. And in the Apocalypse, we see the image of the Risen Lord as the Lamb before the throne of God in glory, and yet slain (Apocalypse 5:6). All of this reminds us that the love of Jesus for us was not some theoretical love. He actually suffered with us and for us, in the midst of brutality and injustice greater than anything you or I will ever experience. That love is not superficial, but involves the readiness to enter into suffering, to take up our cross and follow Jesus. Such is the love of Christ symbolized by the Sacred Heart. Such is the love expected of a disciple of Christ.

The Sacred Heart is portrayed as **encircled by a crown of thorns**. As with the wound in the heart, the crown of thorns reminds us that real love, faithful love, totally committed love for others, can lead to rejection and suffering. If we only act in order to attract applause, and shift our principles to guarantee that approval, we will never truly live or love at all, and we will lose our very self. Real love is inseparable from integrity, and may well include a crown of thorns, which reminds us of the cost of discipleship.

It also reminds us that whenever people are mocked, marginalized, bullied or rejected in any way, the disciple of Jesus must be with them to care for them with the compassion of Christ. Christians in fact have been doing that, for two thousand years, and do so to this day, around the world and, unrecognized, in our own community.

The Sacred Heart is **surmounted by a cross**, the primary symbol of Christian faith: it draws us to contemplate sacrificial love of Jesus, as he lays down his life for us on the cross. In a world that would crucify an innocent man, Jesus returns love for hatred and says: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” (Luke 23:34) The love represented by the Sacred Heart is that sacrificial love which is centered not on self, but on others. We must go and do likewise.

As Saint Paul says, we must have among ourselves the mind of Jesus who “though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” (Philippians 2:6-8) Jesus calls on his disciples to show that same generous and sacrificial love, as we take up our cross and follow him each day.

The Sacred Heart is **surrounded by flames**. These are flames of glory, for love of the quality represented by the love of Jesus is truly glorious. They are flames that provide light in a world darkened by sin, and warmth in a world that too often is cold, that treats people as things to be used, not as persons to be loved. They are flames of zeal, sign of the fire that came down upon the disciples at Pentecost, as they were sent out to set the world on fire for Christ, as are we all.

Sometimes, **Jesus points to the Sacred Heart**, inviting us to come to him when we labour and are heavy laden; sometimes **the arms of Jesus reach outward**, welcoming everyone, as he calls us to do. The Sacred Heart is a powerful symbol of the love of Jesus, which each of us was commissioned to make present in this world on the day we were baptised. More than ever before, our fractious world now needs the love symbolized by the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

III The Meaning of the Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus

The love of Jesus for us all, which is symbolized by his Sacred Heart, is a basic theme of our Christian faith, and of our life of discipleship. That divine love made humanly manifest in our world through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross is a consequence of the fact that “the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us.” (John 1:14) This theme of the Sacred Heart is rooted in the Bible and in the living tradition of the Church, and was developed over the centuries by many great

saints and popes, enriching the spiritual life of countless Christians.

An important moment in the development of devotion to the Sacred Heart came with the great spiritual teacher and Doctor of the Church, Saint Francis de Sales (1567-1622). His masterpieces, the *Introduction to the Devout Life* and the *Treatise on the Love of God* continue to guide Christians to holiness, especially laypeople engaged in the duties of the secular world. Francis had great insights into the human heart, and famously gave this advice on preaching: “The lips speak to the ears, but heart speaks to heart.” That phrase, *Cor ad Cor Loquitur*, was later chosen as the motto of Saint John Henry Newman. In a world of upheaval and religious strife, Saint Francis de Sales was a model of gentleness, and always proclaimed the Faith with both clarity and charity. With Saint Jane Frances de Chantal (1572-1641), in 1610 he founded the Order of the Visitation nuns. The spirituality of the two founders emphasized the love of Jesus, especially as symbolized by the heart.

The saint most associated in recent centuries with the devotion to the Sacred Heart is Saint Margaret Mary Alacoque (1647-1690), a Visitation nun who between 1673 and 1675 received private revelations, visions during prayer of Our Lord, in which he speaks of prayer to the Sacred Heart.

Devotion to the Sacred Heart leads us to ponder the sacred humanity of Jesus, God with us. Using the universally accepted symbol of the heart as the sign of the center of who we are, this devotion focuses on Jesus as the man for others, who showed humans how, in a human way, to love as God loves, and to act as God wants us to act.

It is a *devotion*, not so much a liturgical prayer like the sacraments, though there is a liturgy for the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart. But the devotion to the Sacred Heart is more a way for each of us to intensely encounter Jesus in practices of prayer that move us to be better disciples, and to grow personally in holiness. Meditation upon the loving humanity of Jesus represented by the Sacred Heart, leads each of us to become more on fire for the Lord, to become not a superficial Christian, but a devoted Christian, a dedicated Christian, an intentional Christian committed to living out our baptismal mission to bring Christ into the world.

This devotion works in harmony with two other Christian devotions, also solidly founded on doctrine, which engage the whole person, emotionally as well as intellectually, and which impel the Christian to holiness: devotion to the real presence of Our Lord in the Eucharist, and devotion to Mary.

Devotion to the Sacred Heart is most fully expressed through adoration of Our Eucharistic Lord in the Holy Eucharist, and it is no accident that each year the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart occurs on the Friday following the Solemnity of Corpus Christi. Devotion to the Sacred Heart has also always been closely linked to devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. All three of these are doctrinal devotions, intimate experiences of personal prayer which are founded on the objective doctrinal fact of who God is and how God acts among us. All three are rooted in the incarnation, for God came among us by being born as one of us through Mary, and the night before he offered himself for us on the cross, on that Good Friday of the Sacred Heart, he gave us the sacramental way to be joined to him down through the ages in the Holy Eucharist.

The great English spiritual writer, Msgr. Ronald Knox, sums up the breadth of the meaning of devotion to the Sacred Heart as an expression of our personal experience of the Lord whom we encounter in the Gospels: “The Sacred Heart is the treasury of *all* those splendid qualities with which a perfect life was lived; it is the repository of all those noble thoughts which mankind still venerates in the gospels. It was the Sacred Heart that burned with anger when the traders were driven out of the temple; it was the Sacred Heart that loved the rich young man, yet would not spare him; it was the Sacred Heart that defied Pilate in his own judgment-hall. It is strong and stern and enduring; it hates prevarications and pretences. The perfect flowering of a human life, not on this occasion or that, but all through, all the time, the utter sacrifice of a human will – that is what the Sacred Heart means, and there is no picture, no statue on earth that can portray its infinite beauty.” (Ronald Knox, “The Heart of Christ,” in *Pastoral and Occasional Sermons*, Ignatius Press: San Francisco, 2002, p. 488.) Although the heart is usually seen mainly as the sign of tender affectionate love – and that tender love of Jesus for us is indeed our consolation in our struggles – Msgr. Knox reminds us here of another dimension of the symbol of the heart, also represented in the Sacred Heart: it is a sign of having the courageous heart to fight against whatever is evil. Both Christian Social Justice and Christian charity come from the Sacred Heart.

The doctrinal and spiritual foundations of the devotion to the Sacred Heart are found in Scripture, but it only gradually developed into its present form. For a most thorough study of that development, and of the theology and history of devotion to the Sacred Heart, I highly recommend the excellent book by Timothy O'Donnell, *Heart of the Redeemer: An Apologia for the Contemporary and Perennial Value of the Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2018.

IV Head, Heart, and Hands: To Know, to Love, and to Serve

We must always be guided by reason, to see reality around us with clarity, as it truly is, not as we might want it to be. That is the role of the intellect, and without that we lose touch with the truth. Truth is objective. It is real. We do not make it up. If we concoct for ourselves a world of “my subjective truth”, disconnected from the objective truth that resists our efforts at manipulation, then we are deluded, and our personal life and the life of society will eventually crumble. Such a life is unhinged from the objective reality of who we are, who God is, and what the world is. So the commitment of the intellect to truth is fundamental.

But while clarity of the intellect is essential, it is not sufficient. We also need the will: it is not enough to see clearly what is real and true; we also need to act on that understanding. We are not just well-informed spectators. So the will is also essential.

But intellect and will, while essential, are not sufficient. Dietrich von Hildebrand, in his wonderful book, *The Heart: An Analysis of Human and Divine Affectivity* (South Bend: St. Augustine’s Press, 2007) points out that we also need the heart: the intimate, personal and human center of our living relationship with others, and of our sense of self: we are affective as well as intellectual and decisive. All three must be working in harmony.

In the spirituality of the Sacred Heart devotion that essential affectivity and personal relational warmth, and zealous energy, works in harmony with intellect and will. The devotion is rooted in intellectual reflection upon the Gospel encounter with Jesus, and the doctrine of the incarnation; this leads to deep personal love for Jesus. which bears fruit in a life of decisive Christian action.

We need to think clearly, and we need to act decisively, but Christianity that is only intellectual is sterile, and Christianity that is only an exercise of the will in action is mere busyness, while Christianity that is merely emotional leads to sentimental self-indulgence. Intellect and action without relational love are fruitless, and can be destructive, but in devotion to the Sacred Heart intellect, affectivity, and will are harmoniously joined: head, heart, and hands. The Sacred Heart symbolizes the personal love of Jesus for each of us, and we respond with an intense personal love for Jesus, and a commitment to show to others by our actions the love Jesus shows to us.

As the famous prayer of Saint Richard of Chichester says: “O Lord, three things I pray: to see you more clearly, to love you more dearly, to follow you more nearly, day by day.” Devotion to the Sacred Heart helps us, day by day, to see, love, and follow Jesus.

“Create in me a clean heart, O God.” (Psalm 51:10)

When we speak of offering “heartfelt sympathy”, or of having a “heart to heart talk”, or of believing something “from the bottom of my heart”, we are not simply referring to the affective dimension of the human person, working in harmony with the intellect and will. We are talking about the basic reality of who we are, our personal identity. In ancient times, both in the Bible and in the writings of the early Fathers of the Church, like Saint Augustine, that is what the symbol of the heart meant in its fullness.

When, in Exodus, the heart of Pharaoh is hardened, it means that he himself is hardened. In Psalm 95, which is often prayed at the beginning of the day in the Liturgy of the Hours of the Church, God challenges us to hear his voice, referring to the time in the desert when Moses would not trust God to provide water for his people: “do not harden your hearts as at Meribah, as on the day of Massah in the wilderness, when your fathers put me to the test and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.” (Psalm 95: 8-9) When we reject God’s will, and get trapped by our ego, then we harden our hearts, we harden ourselves. When Samuel chose David, least among his brothers, to lead the people he said “the Lord sees not as man sees; man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.” (I Samuel 16:7)

We can become so self-satisfied, but that only leads to spiritual mediocrity, and none of us can afford that in a world as challenging as the one in which we live. The first message of both John the Baptist and of Jesus was a call to repentance, to a heartfelt turning away from slavery to the ego, and a turning to the way of freedom which God offers: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matthew 3:2; 4:17). He had offered that freedom to Moses and the Hebrews, who were comfortable in their slavery in Egypt, but needed to be set free. He offers now to set us free from our slavery to pride, anger, envy, greed, laziness, lust, and gluttony.

We all need conversion, repentance: a deep change of heart. That is not easy.

When God says to the House of Israel through the prophet Ezekiel “I will give you a new heart, and a new Spirit I will put within you, and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh” (Ezekiel 36:26) he is calling for a deep transformation, a change that goes right to the heart.

In the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says “Blessed are the pure in heart.” (Matthew 5:8) He is calling for integrity at the very heart of each of us. An integer is whole; it is not divided like a fraction. That is what integrity means, to be pure of heart. In so many ways, throughout scripture and certainly in the spiritual heritage of the disciples of Jesus, the heart represents the innermost sanctuary of our human self.

Our hearts must become pure, and they are purified when we encounter the love of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, whom we discover in the Gospel. That is one reason why we should prayerfully read a small portion of the Gospel every day. We can so easily create a false image of Jesus which has no basis in the actual Jesus we meet in the inspired words of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and in the Sacraments of the Church which he gave to us.

That is the real Jesus whom we encounter in our prayerful meditation on the Sacred Heart, especially if we spend time in adoration of Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament, a practice which is central to the Sacred Heart devotion. Accept no substitutes, no false “Jesus” of my imagination, who is a nice person who never challenges me but who smiles in approval of whatever I want to do. Especially in the midst of our struggles, we need to meet Jesus himself, our Lord and our God, who calls us to repentance, and challenges us to embrace the life of holiness shown in the Sermon on the Mount, but who also calls us to be not only servants but friends.

So we need to know Jesus, personally, and deep in our hearts. Focusing on the Sacred Heart leads us to the very heart of who Jesus is, the divine person who took on our humanity, who journeys with us, who meets us on the road, as he did with the discouraged disciples on the road to Emmaus. He so personally connected with them, heart to heart, that they later said “did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?” (Luke 24:32) We need that intense experience of encounter, that will change our lives, and we can find it in the Sacred Heart devotion, especially since it leads us to the Gospel and to the Eucharist.

VI

Living Water in the Desert of Isolation and Ego

All the lonely people. The isolation caused by the painful restrictions of the Covid pandemic make us think about the accuracy of the Beatles' description of a world of loneliness. But even before the present crisis, many factors have led to a mentality which is the source of loneliness: a disposition to worship the unholy trinity of me, myself, and I.

Our culture prizes autonomy, the conviction that it is *my* life that matters most, and I can do what I want with it. I am looking out for myself. As long as I do not obviously interfere with other people's right to satisfy their own egos, my wishes are supreme. That disposition is clearly contrary to the Christian vision of relationships of generous love for others, based on the life of the Trinity revealed to us by the life of Jesus on earth, and particularly symbolized by the Sacred Heart, that sign of his sacrificial love on the Cross. The Christian vision is in stark contrast with the Spirit of our Age that prizes autonomy, the independence of the ego, rather than the inter-dependence of loving sacrifice.

The English poet, John Donne, wisely said, "no man is an island, entire unto himself." We can be trapped into being islands of autonomy – "My life, my body is my own" – but that leads nowhere, except to loneliness, and even to euthanasia and other forms of suicide. And all is made worse by digital culture, and now by Covid isolation, and increasing tension caused by restrictions on our inherent human need to socialize. But the Sacred Heart is the sign of a love that reaches out, in the interdependence of relationship with others, not the sterile independence of autonomy. We find life and joy and the meaning of who we are not in icy isolation, or proud autonomy, or independence, but in the inter-relationship that is ultimately found in the Trinity and is made visible in the sacrificial love of Jesus represented by the Sacred Heart.

Both Christian communities and individual Christians are meant to make incarnate in daily life the generous, inter-personal, relational love that is found in the Trinity. If they really do so, they will also be more effective in evangelizing, especially in this lonely secular world where it is not profound personal relationship but autonomy that is prized. The communion of Trinitarian love, when made present in a Christian community, is as attractive as an oasis in a desert for secular people who have become lost in an abstract, ego-centric, and ultimately sterile exaltation of personal autonomy. We cannot truly love others,

or love God, if we are absorbed in the desires of our own ego, and live in a way that is self-referential. A wise person once said: “If you are all wrapped up in yourself, you make a very small package.”

Although the exaltation of autonomy is the root of many if not most of the evils we face in these days, its very sterility provides an occasion for divine grace and an impetus to conversion. Augustine wrote so many years ago: “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” His profound dissatisfaction with a way of life which exalted the ego but was devoid of true sacrificial love became like the irritating grain of sand within the oyster around which the beautiful pearl is formed. Likewise, today, the exaltation of autonomy causes great evil, but its very sterility can bring people to seek another way of life that is more fruitful, represented by the love for others symbolized by the Sacred Heart. This is a challenge that impels our pastoral zeal to reach out to the modern inhabitants of the sterile secular desert.

Although there are obviously many differences between the cultural situation of Augustine, and that in which we find ourselves, I find it intriguing that this restless man who was himself dissatisfied with the ego-absorbed autonomy which he had attained, devoted much of his life after his conversion to meditating upon the love within the Trinity, which provided him and provides us with an oasis of fruitful life in this barren earthly desert, and guidance on our journey to the promised land.

As the ancient Christian writing called the *Didache* says in its opening line, “There are two ways, the way to death and the way to life, and there is a great difference between them.” The way to life involves relationships of generous love, modelled on the Trinity, and made present in our world in the life of Jesus, especially in his generous love symbolized by the Sacred Heart. The way to loneliness and spiritual death involves living autonomously, without consideration of the outreaching generous love of God and love of neighbour, which is really the only way to life, and which the Sacred Heart of Jesus signifies especially when presented, as it often is, in an image of Jesus with outstretched arms.

A helpful image for these two ways is found in two kinds of clock faces. In an analog clock face the hour hand and the minute hand advance around the dial, and we can tell what time it is by seeing the present moment in relationship to the wider context of past and future. If it is 9:30 the minute hand has gone beyond where it was at 9:25 but has not yet reached where it will be at 9:35. Where we are now is understood within the context of the relationship between past and future.

In the more modern digital type of clock face, very practical but more sterile, all we see is a succession of disconnected points, each autonomous: 9:29, then 9:30, then 9:31, and so on. Each moment succeeds the one before, with no reference to a greater pattern of relationship from which each individual moment derives its meaning. While the analog is integrated, the digital is dis-integrated, fractured.

That digital autonomy is very much the mode of our modern secular world, in which the web of relationship is shattered, and people are increasingly alienated from one another and from God. Christians are analog aliens in a digital desert, because we recognize that we are not independent, but interdependent, and draw life from our relationship with God and neighbour. And we recognize that the life-giving web of relationship is made manifest in the human love that reflects the divine personal love of the Trinity represented on earth by the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

In our own country the Supreme Court unanimously struck down the law forbidding euthanasia. To some degree emotional arguments about the need to spare people from suffering pain were used to justify this decision, and were illustrated by extreme examples, even though in almost all cases modern medicine can deal with the issue of pain. Hard cases make bad law.

But the fundamental argument for euthanasia is instead: “I have the right to decide when I am no longer satisfied with the quality of my life.” People have come to reject the idea that we do not own our own lives, but that we are entrusted with life by God. They do not consider that taking one’s life affects others. Instead: “It is my life, and I can do with it what I want.” That is the sterile vision of autonomy, so different from the inter-personal love to which Jesus calls us, a generous love for others. We find ourselves by not focusing on ourselves, but on others, as Jesus shows us. That sacrificial love for others is what the Sacred Heart represents.

Similarly, those who argue for abortion do not consider the debt of love that is owed to the little child at the very beginning of life. Instead, the winning argument is that a woman has the right to do what she wants with her body, although it is forgotten that abortion most grievously affects another person. Freedom of choice is wrongly defined by autonomy.

Our society is increasingly shaped by social networks and the devices by which we access them, creating a culture of superficial interconnectivity. We speak of the “world wide web”. But these digital landscapes offer only a shallow,

brittle, dry and depersonalized vision of genuine human relationship. It is abstract, not personal. We have technological relationships with people who are absent, while being absent to those who are personally present. We forget those around us as we focus on the screens of our little machines. This can lead to countless islands of loneliness, as real human relationships are replaced by virtual substitutes. We are all becoming aware of this after so much time cut off from natural, personal, human interaction during the pandemic. In the long run, a virtual world is no substitute for human relationship.

To be a friend in real life is qualitatively different from being one of countless internet “friends”. And because the technology of social media is inherently so abstract and impersonal, people regularly write things which are astonishingly harsh and cruel when composing emails, or commenting on blogs, things they would not say face to face in a real human encounter. Some wise advice: “Pause before you hit the ‘send’ button.” The richness of true human love, flowing from the generous love of God, is symbolized in the Sacred Heart – there is nothing abstract there, but a reminder of the deeply personal love of Jesus for us, shown most powerfully and concretely on the cross on Good Friday.

We are analog Christians in a digital world. We are made for relationship - we know who we are by relating to others, as an analog clock shows the time by visualizing the present moment in relationship to what has gone before and what is yet to come. This is an integrated vision of reality. But we have become dis-integrated. Divided. All alone in front of our computer screens.

The Sacred Heart is the sign of the generous, warmly affectionate and sacrificial love that we encounter in Jesus in the Gospel. In the secular desert of autonomy, with joy we will draw water from that well of salvation.

VII Compassion, and its Deadly Imitation: Sentimentality

The symbol of the Sacred Heart, of the compassionate love of Jesus, reminds us that we need to have a humane personal warmth at the center of who we are, a sensitivity which shapes how we relate to ourselves, and to God, and to those around us. We are not meant to operate only with the cold objective clarity of the intellect and the rough power of the will.

But when the heart gets detached from objectivity and clarity, and we operate

only according to our feelings, it can lead to great injustice and personal disaster. Head, heart, and hands must work in harmony.

The heart and hands must be guided by the head. Personal affectivity on its own - the heart alone, disconnected from the objective principles of reason - can lead us to be swept away by a particular emotionally compelling individual situation, and then lead to action that is detached from objective reality, and that is ultimately destructive, because it is not based on the truth revealed by both faith and reason. Sentimental Christianity, which consists of a warm pleasant emotion detached from a concern for the objective truth of the Gospel call to repentance and holiness, can cause people to replace the life-changing challenge of our faith with a cult of niceness. Such sentimentality is an illusion, and there is no future in that.

The Sacred Heart, because it arises out of the love of Jesus on Good Friday, shows us true love, not a sentimental substitute. Sentimental affection, disconnected from faith, reason, and the commitment to act rightly, is always an illusion and is often destructive.

It is sentimentality, that deceptive substitute for compassion, that can lead judges to think that they can over-rule “Thou shalt not kill”. And sentimentality can lead well intentioned Christians who are unfamiliar with the real Jesus whom we encounter in the actual Gospel to respond to the very real distress of others by seeking to deny the reality of the human condition, persuading those who are suffering distress to find relief by over-riding faith, reason, science, and common sense in order to embrace some trendy woke ideology out of touch with the reality of the human person. It is illusion that destroys, and a sentimentality guided by illusion is not love; it is not compassion. It ultimately causes great and irremediable suffering.

Devotion to the Sacred Heart calls forth from our hearts a loving personal response to Jesus and to the pathway to holiness that he reveals in the Gospel; it is a pathway that begins with his initial message: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,” (Matthew 4:17) The love of Christ which we celebrate is always found in the context of the truth of God’s will, and the bracing call to holiness. Jesus does not just look kindly on our sinfulness, and say that everything is fine; that would be sentimentality, a subjective warmth out of touch with truth. No, the Lord who has mercy casts light on our sins, and calls on us to change, to repent. Mercy must always be founded on the recognition of sin, and of the call to repentance.

The loving personal warmth of the Sacred Heart is revealed in John 8:1-11, when the heartless crowd brought to Jesus the woman caught in adultery. Jesus courageously challenged their consciences by telling anyone without sin to cast the first stone; imitation of Christ requires such courage from us as well. And when they all left without condemning her, he showed the loving mercy of the Sacred Heart, warmly affectionate: “Neither do I condemn you.” Christians who privilege the warmth of kindness alone stop at this, feeling that this is what it means to do what Jesus would do. Be kind. They do not notice that Jesus then added: “Go, and from now on sin no more.” Affectionate love is only real when it is set within the context of objective truth.

Similarly, when prayer is seen as being totally a personal emotional experience disconnected from the reality of God’s plan for us all, and from the teachings that reveal that plan in Scripture and tradition, and from the community of the Church, then such sentimental prayer experiences can be unhealthy. We turn inward, and become piously self-indulgent. Even the Sacred Heart devotion has sometimes been distorted, and presented with a repulsive and saccharine sentimentality in language and art. But that is not true to the wholesome doctrinal devotion to the Sacred Heart, based on the objective truth of our faith, subjectively intense with affection, and fruitfully decisive in action.

VIII The Sacred Heart and Social Justice

It is sometimes thought that devotion to the Sacred Heart can be rather individualistic – nothing but a personal relationship between me and Jesus. But that is the opposite of the spirituality of the Sacred Heart. We see in Jesus a love for his heavenly Father that moves outward in this world to the love of neighbour.

Jesus draws on the Old Testament to remind us of the two great commandments of love: “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” (Matthew 22:37-39) On the cross itself, the compassionate love of the heart of Jesus reaches out to console the criminal crucified with him. (Luke 23:39-43) It is not a love that is restricted to some safe place of religious piety: the love of the heart of Jesus encompassed the most marginalized in his society, symbolized by the lepers he healed. It is a practical love represented by the

shrewd practicality of the Good Samaritan, who knew what to do to really help the man lying wounded at the side of the road. (Luke 10:33-35)

The Sacred Heart statues with outstretched hands challenge us to care for those most in need. The famous story of such a statue of the Sacred Heart, with hands blown off during battles in World War I France, speaks of this. When, after the war, the parishioners wanted to get a sculptor to repair the hands, a wiser person said: “No, leave it as it is, but put a sign on the statue saying “You are his hands.” And so we are, extending the practical love of Jesus to others. Head, heart, and hands.

The Sacred Heart reaches outward in practical love. But is this not charity, instead of justice? It certainly is a call to practical love in the service of others, but flowing from that is awareness of the need to work to change the social structures that lead to suffering. Christian social justice needs a foundation in the spiritual wisdom of the Sacred Heart devotion, for a shadow side of the passion for justice can be an abstract and generalized concern for justice for humanity, forgetting the individual. The Sacred Heart devotion is a corrective to that: we are called to serve the cause of justice for all by recognizing the dignity of each individual, each person loved as Jesus loves, fully, warmly, and one at a time.

It is not surprising that Pope Leo XIII, who initiated the modern Social Teaching of the Catholic Church with his encyclical *Rerum Novarum* in 1893 is also the same pope who initiated the modern approach to devotion to the Sacred Heart in his encyclical *Annum Sacrum* in 1899, when he consecrated humanity to the Sacred Heart. He considered that act to be the high point of his pontificate.

IX The Day and the Month of the Sacred Heart: Friday and June

Friday is the day of the Sacred Heart. The Solemnity of the Sacred Heart is always celebrated on a Friday, because Good Friday is the day of the crucifixion, and that is where the love of Jesus in the Sacred Heart is revealed. It is celebrated on the Friday that follows the Solemnity of Corpus Christi, because personal prayer to Our Lord in the Holy Eucharist is an essential element of the devotion of the Sacred Heart. Both celebrate the human encounter with the love of Jesus on the Cross: in the Sacred Heart, and in the continuing sacramental presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. It is a custom to link a Holy Hour of Adoration of the Lord in the Eucharist to the focus on the Sacred Heart on Friday, especially on the

First Friday of the month, when many people make a special effort to attend Mass as part of the Sacred Heart devotion.

For Catholic Christians, as May is the Month of Mary, so June is the Month of the Sacred Heart. This is because the link to the Solemnity of Corpus Christi results in the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart almost always being celebrated in the month of June. I strongly encourage individuals, families, parishes and Catholic schools to specially dedicate the month of June to the Sacred Heart.

X **Some Practical Suggestions for Devotion to the Sacred Heart**

Many spiritually fruitful elements of the modern devotion to the Sacred Heart come from the mystical visions of Jesus which Saint Margaret Mary (1647-1690) experienced between 1673 and 1675, in which he spoke to her of the Sacred Heart. Here are a few suggestions:

- 1. Make a Holy Hour** of prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. This was emphasized in the private revelation to Saint Margaret Mary. As Bishop Sheen remarks, spending an hour with Jesus is the only thing relating to himself that he specifically asked of us, when he said in the Garden of Gethsemane: “So, could you not watch with me one hour?” (Matthew 26:40) One can make this Holy Hour with any frequency; Bishop Sheen urges priests to do so every day.
- 2. Read a portion of one of the Gospels every day.** It might perhaps be the Gospel reading for the Mass of the day, or it might simply be a chapter a day. The Gospel of Matthew has 28 chapters, the Gospel of Mark has 16, the Gospel of Luke has 24, and the Gospel of John has 21: a total of 89 chapters, so that at a chapter a day the whole Gospel can be read about four times a year. Each chapter takes only a few minutes to read prayerfully, so as to encounter Jesus, and to experience the love of his Sacred Heart.
- 3. It is spiritually valuable to participate in Mass** at any time, but to do so on consecutive First Fridays is a custom associated with devotion to the Sacred Heart.
- 4. Place an image of the Sacred Heart in your home, and consecrate your family to the Sacred Heart.** As it has been said, the

family that prays together stays together, and both devotion to the love of the Sacred Heart and the praying of the Rosary can strengthen the love at the heart of each family. For a service of consecration of the family, see *A Heart on Fire*, by Father James Kubicki, pp. 164-168.

5. Give prominence to an **image of the Sacred Heart in your parish Church**. Parishes are encouraged to specially emphasize the Sacred Heart on the first Friday of every month, and throughout the month of June.

6. **Catholic schools** have a responsibility to help their students, and all in the school community, to **encounter Jesus**, who will inspire and challenge them, and change their lives, as they enter deeply into the prayerful study of the Gospels, and the rest of sacred Scripture, and draw guidance from the living faith of the Church upon which the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost. Promotion of devotion to the Sacred Heart is a way to do that.

7. **Personally, carry an image of the Sacred Heart**, and use it as a constant reminder of the generous love of Jesus which it symbolizes. Then put that love into practice throughout the day.

XI Prayer of the Heart

The prayers of the Sacred Heart take us deep into the heart of our self, and lead us to God. We do not find confusing and over-complex intellectuality, but a simple “heart to heart” with the Lord, in the silence of our hearts. In another tradition, that of Eastern Christian spirituality, which differs from the Sacred Heart devotion, we nonetheless see some similarity, as in the constant repetition of the Jesus Prayer: *“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”* This can very much be a prayer of the Sacred Heart, with its focus on the mercy which is central to the spiritual theme of the Sacred Heart.

We can grow in holiness by weaving through our day the constant repetition of the Jesus prayer, and also of the short prayer: *“O Sacred Heart of Jesus, I place all my trust in you.”*

Whenever anxious, in whatever desert of modern life you find yourself in, repeat throughout the day the verse from the prophet Isaiah that is closely associated with the gloriously divine and humanely human devotion to the Sacred Heart, *“With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.”* (Isaiah 12:3).

That verse provided the name for the most important papal encyclical on the Sacred Heart, *Haurietis Aquas* (“You will draw water”) of Pius XII in 1956. It is also quoted in the Preface of the Mass of the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart. For that matter, go to the Vatican website and read this wonderful meditation on the deep meaning of the devotion to the Sacred Heart.

Some people find great spiritual value in beginning the day with the Morning Offering Prayer:

“O Jesus, through the Immaculate Heart of Mary, I offer you my prayers, works, joys and sufferings of this day for all of the intentions of your Sacred Heart, in union with the holy sacrifice of the Mass throughout the world, in thanksgiving for your favours, in reparation for my sins, for the intentions of all my relatives and friends, and in particular for the intentions of the Holy Father, Amen.”

XII The Litany of the Sacred Heart

The Litany of the Sacred Heart was put in its present form by Leo XIII in 1899. At first sight, it can seem a bit strange, with a few unfamiliar images, such as “Heart of Jesus, desire of the eternal hills, have mercy on us”. But we can truly be blessed if we pray this wondrous litany, a true treasure of Christian prayer, and discover the rich biblical meaning of its individual invocations. Dietrich Von Hildebrand’s *The Heart* has a final section in which he presents the passages from the Bible, and mainly from the Gospel, that are the foundation for the various invocations in the Litany. Father James Kubicki, in *A Heart on Fire: Rediscovering Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 2012, pp. 27-33), also gives biblical references for each of the 33 invocations of the Litany.

Like the Rosary, the litany is a repetitive prayer, and the repetition of “Have mercy on us” after each line is, in fact, like our regularly repeating heartbeat, very calming: once we meditate on the references, it gives us insight into the love of God for us in Jesus, and it gives us serenity through the heartbeat of its repetitive pattern. In our frazzled world these days, we especially need both that insight and that serenity.

Have mercy on us

Have mercy on us

Have mercy on us

Have mercy on us

Have mercy on us

Have mercy on us

Have mercy on us

Have mercy on us

Have mercy on us

Have mercy on us

Have mercy on us

Have mercy on us

Have mercy on us

Have mercy on us

Have mercy on us

Have mercy on us

Have mercy on us

Have mercy on us

Have mercy on us

Have mercy on us



Some Helpful Resources

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