

DOMINICAN DEVOTION TO THE SACRED HEART

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THE HEART of Christ is the living and expressive symbol of divine and human love for all mankind. This Heart was closed before the Passion, because it was unknown, but after the Passion it was opened so that holy souls might see that all the prophecies were fulfilled. It is true that in the Middle Ages great stress was placed upon the devotion to the Wounds of the Saviour without specific reference to His Sacred Heart, yet there were many devout persons in the Order of Preachers who penetrated more deeply into those Wounds and discovered in the Pierced Heart, the emblem of love and the door that opens to eternal salvation.

GERMANY

The earliest account of devotion to the Sacred Heart in the Dominican Order is found in *The Light of Divinity*, a small book, containing the visions of a pious woman, Mechtilde (+ 1250), written at the request of her spiritual director, a Dominican friar from the convent of Magdeburg. She relates that on one occasion Our Lord appeared to her and said: "In the Order of Preachers there are two things, i.e., the cult shown and the great fruit derived which I esteem so highly that I always smile from the depths of My Sacred Heart; for both men and women with all the power at their command zealously preach the glory of My Majesty."¹ Mechtilde always prayed that the Dominicans by their labors would continue to make reparation for the insults directed against the Sacred Heart.

The prayers of Mechtilde were fully realized in the personal sanctity and learned writings of St. Albert the Great (+ 1280). In his treatise on the Eucharist he shows the intimate relationship existing between the Blessed Sacrament and the Sacred Heart. "(This Sacrament) is called the Eucharist because it is not given to us except by the Most Benevolent Lord. . . . There are six things which make every heart open up to its neighbor: goodness, benignity, piety, sweetness, charity and placability, which have disposed the Heart of God to prepare this grace. Goodness, says Dionysius, is a communication

¹ Richstätter, *Revelationes Gertrudianae ac Mechtildianae*, Pictavii-Parisiis 1877, II, 491.

and diffusion of one's self to all. Benignity is the overflow of a burning good and of a continually dissolving heart emanating in every goodness. . . . Charity, however, is a fire inflaming and burning the heart that the entire being may spend itself for the benefit of the beloved. . . . These have made the Heart of the Most Benevolent God prepare this grace for us. In this He communicates to us His own Deity and His entire self flows into us, diffusing Itself spiritually and corporally through our entire body and soul by participation."² "There is no measure sufficient for the salvation of man except that which contains the grace in which the entire Christ is contained. This is the golden urn containing manna, which is kept in the Holy of Holies and suffices for the needs of everyone. The golden urn is either the exterior form which includes this grace; or it is the Heart, which contains in itself this grace, signifying the Body of Christ with the Soul of Christ and the Soul of the Deity Itself, which Entire Thing is nothing except grace: because besides the merit we receive the great benefit of grace. In this truly, *grace and truth came by Jesus Christ*."³ St. Albert raises the sacramental veil of the Eucharist and reveals the adorable Heart consumed and inflamed with an everlasting love that reaches out to embrace all men.

The traditions of St. Albert were fostered under the capable leadership of the great German mystics of the fourteenth century. Their writings, preaching and especially their exemplary lives of obedience, humility and suffering were emulated, by religious and laymen alike, as the perfect models of Christian spirituality and piety. Master Eckhart (+ 1327) in his writings explained the intimate union between the Heart of Christ and the heart of the communicant in the reception of the Holy Eucharist. He urged the faithful to prepare themselves diligently for the worthy reception of Holy Communion so that they might be more closely united to the Sacred Heart and be joined in mutual love. The fervor of his own soul can be seen in the following meditation which he directed to the Sacred Heart: "Oh, how great is that undeserved compassion, and how great the faithful charity of Jesus, which nowhere better proved itself than in that place where the greatest efficacy of love broke forth impetuously from the Heart of Jesus. His Heart on the cross was as a fire and furnace from which flames blazed forth on all sides. Thus, on the cross He was totally consumed by the ardor of His pious love for the whole world."⁴ —John Tauler (+ 1361) when preaching pleaded with his audiences

² *De eucharistia*, dist. I, 2, ed. Borgnet XXXVIII, 194s.

³ John 1, 17; idem: dist. 1, c. 1.

⁴ *Meister Eckhart*, ed. Pfeiffer. Leipzig 1857, 220.

to flee the dangers of the world and seek refuge in the Heart of Jesus, wherein they would find true peace and perfect happiness. — Bl. Henry Suso (+ 1366) in his *Little Book of Eternal Wisdom* displayed great tenderness for the Heart of the suffering Christ and he so planned the meditations in it, that those who read them were immediately drawn to the Sacred Heart. This little book enjoyed as much popularity at that time as the *Imitation of Christ* does in our own day.

ITALY

St. Thomas Aquinas (+ 1274), disciple and student of St. Albert the Great, must have been familiar with the ideas of his master on the Sacred Heart, yet it is difficult to find in his works, texts which directly illustrate the doctrine of the Sacred Heart as we know it today. However, an authentic text which seems to enunciate the mind of St. Thomas, is his explanation of a passage from St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians: "*in the bowels of Jesus Christ.*"⁵ St. Thomas explains that since "the desire of the heart is manifest to God alone, therefore, he (Paul) calls upon God as a witness that he prays for them with desire: *For behold my witness is in heaven*⁶ i.e., God, *how I desire you, i.e., I, existing in the bowels of Jesus Christ.* How I desire you to be in them—meaning, how I desire your safety and participation in the bowels of Christ's charity . . . as if to say, the virtue of love penetrates into the depths and innermost recesses of the heart. Or, I desire that you be in the bowels of Jesus Christ, i.e., intimately love Him and be loved by Him; for in this indeed does the life of man consist."⁷

There are numerous references to the Heart of Jesus in the writings of St. Catherine of Siena (+ 1380) because as the spouse of Christ she was blessed with the Sacred Stigmata and lived in intimate union with the Suffering Saviour. She was privileged to view the intimate secrets of the Wounded Heart. In the *Dialogue* we read: "O sweet and Immaculate Lamb! You were dead when Your Side was opened, why did you wish to be struck and wounded in the Heart? And He answered: That you should remember that there were sufficient reasons which I had; some of the principal ones I will tell you. —Because My desire toward mankind was infinite and the actual work of bearing pain and torment was infinite: but through a finite thing I could not show how much I loved because My Love was infinite. And besides, I wished you to see the secret of My Heart, shown

⁵ Phil. 1, 8.

⁶ Job 16, 20.

⁷ cap. 1, lect. II. Editio Parmensis 1862, XIII, 507.

open that you could see that I love more than I could show by finite pains."⁸ Now we can understand and appreciate why St. Catherine overcame tremendous obstacles to guard the destiny of the Church.

SPAIN

Two hundred years after the death of St. Catherine in Italy, the veneration of the Sacred Heart was still fostered and it had spread to Spain where it was nourished and cultivated under the experienced direction of Venerable Louis of Granada (+ 1588), one of the great masters of the spiritual life. The following passages are taken from some of his writings, which clearly illustrate the true piety of the author: "Having finished the Holy Supper and established the mysteries for our happiness, the Saviour opened the door to all the anguish and dolours of His Passion, that all might come to assail His Sorrowful Heart, that He might first be crucified and tormented in soul, and then, in body.—Then, O my Saviour and Redeemer, what heart will be so hard that will not break with pain (for on this day even the rocks were broken) considering what you have suffered on that cross? The Father has abandoned you. What can you expect from men? Truly have my sins been great and your penitence does declare them.—Then comes the soldier with lance in hand and thrusts it with great force through the breast of the Saviour. The cross rocked in air with the force of the blow and from the cut there came forth water and blood which washed away the sins of the world. O Wound of the Precious Side, made more with the love of men, than with the iron of the cruel lance!"⁹

SOUTH AMERICA

When the Spanish friars came to the New World they inculcated in the minds and hearts of the people the truths of Christianity and the venerated traditions of the Order of Preachers. St. Rose of Lima (+ 1617), a member of the Third Order, was visited by Our Lord and she was chosen to be the spouse of His Heart. He greeted her with the following words: "Rose of My Heart, give me your heart."¹⁰ During her life she labored to bring men to a knowledge and love of the Divine Heart.

⁸ *Libro della Divina Dottrina*. Ed. M. Fiorilli. Bari 1912, p. 142.

⁹ *Obras de Fr. Luis de Granada de la Orden de Santo Domingo*. Edición crítica y completa por Fr. Justo Cuervo, de la misma Orden. Madrid 1906, XI, 382, II, 69, 72; XII, 460.

¹⁰ L. Hansen, *Vita B. Rosae*, c. 11.

FRANCE AND THE UNITED STATES

Similar efforts were exercised by such men as Père Lacordaire (+ 1893) and Richard P. Miles (+ 1860). Père Lacordaire with eloquence and the grace of God softened the hearts of the French people, hardened with hatred and indifference. He overcame, by word and example, contempt for the heart of Christ which was one of many opprobriums bred during the so-called "glorious revolution." A church in Moulins was dedicated to the Sacred Heart because of his personal influence. In the United States, Richard P. Miles, first Bishop of Nashville, instituted in the parishes of his diocese confraternities in honor of the Sacred Heart. By this act he manifested his own sentiments and affections.

APPROBATION OF THE MASTERS GENERAL

Down through the centuries the cult of the Sacred Heart has received the expressed approval of the Masters General who have always encouraged the brethren to cultivate this devotion so that their apostolic ministry might lead them to sanctity and lead more souls to Christ. Bl. Raymond of Capua (+ 1399), Master General during the period of the restoration of regular observance, requested the brothers and sisters to adopt this devotion as a most efficacious way of safeguarding the religious life. Vincent Jandel (+ 1872) consecrated the Order to the Sacred Heart and this act of consecration was repeated twenty years later by Andrew Frühwirth (+ 1904). Hyacinth Cormier (+ 1916), wishing to manifest publically the Dominican Order's love and reverence had an image of the Sacred Heart painted above the main altar in the chapel attached to the residence of the Master General.

Authority, doctrine, and history are evident testimony establishing the fact that the veneration of the Sacred Heart in the Order of Preachers is built upon the solid foundations of Dominican spirituality. The devotion to the Sacred Heart is an inexhaustible source of grace and its profound mysteries will unfold before those who seek them.

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