

## THE THEOLOGY OF THE DEVOTION TO THE SACRED HEART OF JESUS

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"The Heart of Jesus is the Heart of a divine Person, that is, of the Incarnate Word, and . . . by it all the love with which He loved, and even now continues to love us is represented and, so to speak, placed before our very eyes."<sup>1</sup>

THESE WORDS of the late Pontiff, Pius XII, in the encyclical letter "Haurietis Aquas" of May 15, 1956, lay bare the theological foundation of the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. It is a devotion to love, the love which led Christ to the cross of Calvary, and beyond to the sanctification of the members of His Mystical Body. The mystery of the cross is the mystery of the redemptive Incarnation, and the Incarnation is *par excellence* the mystery of love: devotion to the Sacred Heart is devotion to that human and divine love which consumed the Heart of our divine Redeemer. Thus, the redemptive activity of the God-man in His passion and death is the key to the understanding of the Sacred Heart. Removed from the context of our redemption, this devotion degenerates into an emotional and sentimental piety altogether alien to Dominican Spirituality. It will be our purpose to discuss in summary fashion, the theological *nexus* between the doctrine of the Incarnation and the Sacred Heart as taught in the "Haurietis Aquas," with special reference to St. Thomas' tract on the Incarnation.

### HEART OF JESUS, SYMBOL OF INFINITE LOVE!

Of fundamental importance in our discussion is the determination of the precise object of devotion to the Sacred Heart. Are we to conceive the Heart of Jesus merely as the physical organ, vitally involved in the continuation of human life, without refer-

ence to the natural and supernatural affective life of Christ? Or does the devotion center around the so called "ethical" Heart of Jesus, which would include not only the physical organ but also the soul with all its natural and supernatural endowments? In truth, devotion to the Sacred Heart embraces both aspects, but with qualifications.

According to the teaching of Pius XII, the object of the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus is the actual, physical Heart of Christ, formed in the womb of the Blessed Virgin, pierced by the soldier's lance on Calvary, which now shines forth in the glorified body of Jesus in Heaven. But over and above the physical Heart, the Devotion is centered in the Heart of Jesus as the "symbol and index" of the love of Christ. In the words of Pius XII:

"His Heart, more than all the rest of the members of His Body, is the natural sign and symbol of His boundless love for the human race."<sup>2</sup>

This, in fact, is the distinguishing aspect of "the" devotion to the Heart of Jesus. In view of the hypostatic union, the human nature of Christ communicates in the divine existence of the Word; Christ is divine, and as a divine Person, worthy of adoration. Insofar as each member of Our Lord's body exists in virtue of divine subsistence, it too may be the object of adoration. We may adore the pierced hands of the Saviour, and in the same sense we may adore the Heart of Jesus. But this would not be "the" devotion to the Sacred Heart; it would be "a" devotion to the Heart of Jesus, but without the symbolism of love, it would not be the devotion spoken of in "Haurietis Aquas," nor the devotion of St. Margaret Mary. Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus is devotion to the love of Christ symbolized in His divine heart of flesh. Hence, we may distinguish the material object of this devotion—the physical heart of the Saviour, and the formal object—the physical heart *precisely* as a symbol of love.

This symbolism of the heart, though it has been called into question because of modern scientific findings in the field of physiology, is nevertheless, naturally and in a sense supernaturally appropriate. There is no doubt that undue stress and emphasis can be placed on the role of the heart in our affective life, and it would be entirely erroneous to conceive of the heart as the organ by which man elicits properly human actions of rational love, but no one can deny the symbolic role of the heart in the affective side of human experience, the identification of the heart with the

noble emotions of love, joy and courage. Even our ordinary mode of speech betrays this identification: we use the expressions "large-hearted," "heart of stone," "pure of heart" and the like—not in a purely metaphorical sense, but because experience has shown us the actual relationship of the physical reactions of the heart with the states denoted by these phrases. Moreover, the heart, as the organ of circulation, is vital to all sensory experience of emotion and affection which form such an integral part of our human operation. This intimate union and interactivity of corporeal and spiritual elements in man is verified in an univocal sense of Jesus Christ, and indeed is the very basis of the symbolism of love found in the Sacred Heart. In summary, we may say that the object of the devotion to the Sacred Heart is the Heart of Jesus, adorable in itself and symbolic of His Infinite love for us.

#### HEART OF JESUS SUBSTANTIALLY UNITED TO THE WORD OF GOD!

We have indicated that the mystery of the Redemptive Incarnation is a mystery of love, and that devotion to the Sacred Heart is devotion to that love. A more accurate analysis of the connection between the Incarnation and the Sacred Heart reveals the profound ramifications of this devotion, which moved Pope Leo XIII to characterize it as the "most excellent form of religion."

St. Thomas tells us in the IIIa Pars of the *Summa*, that the Incarnation, the assumption of human nature by the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, is the greatest and most perfect communication of divine Goodness *ad extra*, that is, outside the Trinity Itself, the greatest act of Love. At Mary's Fiat, divine Omnipotence communicates to the human nature of Christ the infinite and divine existence of the Word. We are in awe at this divine largess, our minds stupified by God's benevolence. Man has been the recipient of God's mercy in many ways, but none can compare with the supernatural gift of divine existence in the Incarnation. What has occasioned this act of infinite love—what motivated God in bestowing such a gift on man? St. Thomas insists explicitly and implicitly that the motive of the Incarnation was mankind's redemption, his reconciliation to God and reconstitution in grace. God's love for sinful man moved Him to send His Divine Son, and the Son's love for us elicited the supreme act of love, the supreme sacrifice of Calvary.

Omnipotent love conceived mankind's redemption; Divine Wisdom decreed the Hypostatic Union as the most fitting manner of accomplishing this redemption. Man, in the person of Adam, had sinned against God—his sin was in a sense, infinite. His satisfaction must be infinite. No mere man could offer this infinite satisfaction—his creatureliness precludes action of infinite merit. Only the satisfaction offered by an infinite Person could atone for this offense according to the strict rigor of justice. Our Saviour must be a God-man—True God and perfect man. God, then, in willing the Incarnation made possible the redemption of man; for Christ, as a divine Person could posit infinite actions, and as man could offer sacrifice to God. The personal union of divine and human nature in Christ made possible vital human operations of merit, sacrifice and satisfaction which had infinite value before the face of God.

#### HEART OF JESUS FULL OF GOODNESS AND LOVE!

Divine Love had found a way to meet the demands of Divine Justice, and that way was the way of love itself. The love of the Blessed Trinity for mankind set in motion the work of the redemption. That love caused the Incarnation, lifting up the human nature of Christ to the sphere of divine existence. Jesus was conceived in love, lived in love and died in love. The Man of Sorrows is also the Man of Love—love of God and of His fellow man permeated His very Being—it was the *raison d'être* of His life and death.

Pope Pius XII distinguishes a three-fold love in Christ, a three-fold love symbolized in the Sacred Heart—the Subsistent Love which is the Divine Nature, the supernatural love of Charity, and the sensible love of His Human Nature.

Jesus, as the Son of God, consubstantial with the Father and the Holy Spirit, shares with Them the divine love of the Godhead. In the Hypostatic Union, the Person of the Word remains unaltered, retains all the perfection of the Divine Nature. It is this same divine love of mankind which effects the Incarnation, and it is this love in the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity which moves Him to assume human nature. This love in Christ is the Grace of Union—the humanity of Christ is permeated by the Subsistence of the Word. The actions of Christ are the actions of a Divine Person, and the love which flows from His Divine Nature is attributed to this God-man, Jesus Christ. Jesus truly loves

sinful mankind with the infinite, uncreated love proper to a Divine Person.

This infinite, uncreated love of Jesus, however, does not preclude the existence in Him of a finite, created love, a love which flows from the gift of Sanctifying Grace. It must be borne in mind that the Word took to Himself a perfect human nature; hence He was endowed with the capabilities of acting in a human manner. He could and did elicit acts of human love, flowing from His free human will. These human acts of Christ's natural faculties, moreover, were raised to the supernatural level by the gift of a created grace far surpassing any gift of grace bestowed on any man. This gift of Sanctifying Grace, accompanied by the infused virtue of supernatural Charity, flows from the Hypostatic Union as a moral property. The communication of divine existence to the human nature of Christ, the Grace of Union, is of the substantial order, rendering Christ infinitely Holy in the order of being. From this substantial sanctification of the humanity of Christ, there arises an exigence, a real demand for sanctification of His humanity in the accidental, operational order. In the Saviour's redemptive activity, His human nature plays an indispensable part. The work of merit, sacrifice and satisfaction must be supernatural, free *human* acts, elicited under the influence of the supernatural habit of Charity. To deny the principle of these actions, the infused virtue of Charity, and to affirm the need only of transitory actual graces in Christ's humanity, is to accuse God of niggardliness in the bestowal of His grace. It is to derogate the Divine Wisdom. The infused habit of Charity in the soul of Christ is the principle of that supreme act of love by which Jesus accomplished our redemption; indeed it is the principle of His every action. The perfection of this love is beyond our comprehension. It flows from an infinite grace<sup>3</sup> and is "enlightened and directed"<sup>4</sup> by the incomparable intellectual perfection which is Christ's.

Over and above this twofold spiritual love, the Sacred Heart is also the symbol of that sensible love rooted in the perfect humanity of Christ.<sup>5</sup> Jesus was true man, a perfect man endowed with all the cognitive and appetitive faculties proper to a creature composed of spiritual and corporal elements. Man is of body and soul—to deny the perfections proper to His body is to deny His human nature. The intimate connexion of the sensible love of Christ and the doctrine of the Hypostatic Union is clearly taught by the Holy Father :

"For by faith, through which we believe that the human and divine natures were united in the Person of Christ, we can see the closest bonds between the sensible love of the physical Heart of Jesus and the twofold spiritual love, namely human and divine."<sup>6</sup>

Devotion to the Sacred Heart, then, is a return of love, a response of the love in our hearts to the human and divine love of our Redeemer.

### HEART OF JESUS FONT OF LIFE AND HOLINESS!

We have insisted on the intimate connection and interrelation of the devotion to the Sacred Heart and the mystery of the Redemptive Incarnation of the Son of God. We have discussed in general terms the love of God for man, the love of the Saviour by which He elicited the redemptive act of the cross, and the symbolism of the Sacred Heart with regard to these loves. It remains now to apply this doctrine to our spiritual life—the role of the Sacred Heart in the sanctification of the Mystical Body.

God, in His infinite Goodness, has willed from all eternity that man should partake of His Happiness. For this were we created and to this should our every action tend—"to know, love and serve God in this life, and to be happy with Him in the next." But knowledge and love of God are supernatural gifts—gifts of His love. Gifts which Adam and Eve had lost for us by their sin of disobedience in the Garden of Paradise. After the fall, mankind was destitute of God's grace—he was filled with sin. He deserved nothing from God, and indeed owed Him an infinite debt of justice—one which he alone could not pay. But God deigned to restore man to divine favor, He willed that man be redeemed from his iniquity. God the Father sent His Only Begotten Son as Saviour.

Christ, the Incarnate Word, in loving obedience to His Father's command, offered Himself as sacrificial Victim to appease the divine justice, to bring about the redemption of His fellow man. "God so loved the world that He sent His Only Begotten Son, and the Son so loved us that He gave His life for our salvation." Our redemption was conceived and accomplished in love.

Jesus, in dying on the cross merited eternal salvation for all men. This action is termed *objective redemption*. In accepting this sacrifice, God erases the debt due to original sin. Mankind, through the passion and death of Our Lord is reconciled to God and delivered from eternal punishment. The Passion is accomplished by love, this act is elicited by Jesus' free human will under

the impulse of the infused virtue of Charity. Love is the very cause of our redemption—love symbolized in the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Distinguished from this *objective redemption*, of which the supernatural Charity of Christ is the principal efficient cause, is *subjective redemption*—the application of the merits of the cross to the members of the Mystical Body. Christ merited by His death eternal salvation for each man; but the reward was to be distributed, so to speak, by Jesus Christ Who had alone merited it. The sanctification of the Christian is brought about by grace—sanctifying grace. St. Thomas teaches that this grace is friendship with God, a participation in the intimate life of God, a communication in the very happiness of the God Head. But it is also a *Christian* grace—a grace of conformity to the passion and death of Jesus Christ. The grace of the present economy of salvation is the grace of the cross—all grace is Christ's grace.

The role of the Sacred Heart in conferring grace upon the members of the Mystical Body is to be understood in the context of principal and instrumental efficiency. God alone is the principal efficient cause of grace in the souls of men; the Trinity alone can raise man to a participation in the Triune Happiness; the God-head alone can grant communication in Divine Beatitude, which is grace. But Infinite Wisdom has willed to use the humanity of Christ as an instrument in causing grace. The Infinite Love of God communicates the power of raising man to divine life, to the infused Charity of Christ. And like any instrument, the humanity of Christ in effecting our sanctification, not only receives and transmits the operation of the Principal Agent, but it also has its own proper operation. The human nature of Christ elicits its own vital human actions in causing the effect of the superior cause. The properly human acts of the humanity of Christ are acts of supernatural love and knowledge. In acting instrumentally, these acts are raised to an effectiveness which transcends human capabilities.

A more ample exposition of the nature of instrumental causality, and its application to the causality of the humanity of Christ in our sanctification would be necessary for a complete understanding of the role of the Sacred Heart in our spiritual life. Unfortunately, this is impossible here. It must suffice to present merely a summary of the preceding doctrine by way of conclusion.

In the devotion of the Sacred Heart, we adore the physical

Heart of Jesus as a symbol of that threefold love, divine, infused and sensible, which consumed the Heart of Jesus and which wrought our salvation. The divine love of the God-head for mankind motivated the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity to assume human nature.

The infused love of Charity elicited the supreme act of love, the sacrifice of the cross, which purchased our redemption. The sensible love of Christ is the perfect indication of the profundity of that love. In applying the merits of the cross Jesus' human will elicits vital acts of love for man, causing grace in his soul as an instrument of divinity, anticipating, in a sense, the decree of the Divine Will with respect to each soul. Perfect harmony exists between the divine Will and the human will of Christ, between the divine love for man, and Christ's human love. This is the love which we adore in the Sacred Heart—the love which accomplished our redemption and now and forever causes our sanctification and beatitude. Our only answer to this love can be an answer of love.

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Encyclical Letter of Pius XII "Haurietis Aquas" of May 15, 1956, N.C.W.C. translation, p. 30, No. 142.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7, No. 27.

<sup>3</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, IIIa, q. 7, art. 11.

<sup>4</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 16, No. 64.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16, No. 65.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30, No. 137.



"Wherefore the wound of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, which had now completed the course of this mortal life, is down through the ages the living image of that love freely bestowed by which God gave His only begotten Son for the redemption of man, and with which Christ loved us all so intensely that He offered Himself for us a bloody victim on Calvary: 'Christ also loved us and delivered Himself up for us as an offering and a sacrifice to God to ascend in fragrant odor.'"

(POPE PIUS XII, *Haurietis Aquas*)