

Theology of the Sacred Heart



The Church celebrates the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus on the Friday following the second Sunday after Pentecost, i.e., the Solemnity of Corpus Christi. One of the most intriguing dimensions of this celebration is its connection with popular piety: its source is rooted in popular devotion and it continues to be one of the most popular and widespread devotions in the Church today. However, the reformed liturgy for the Mass and Office of this feast includes Word, symbol, euchology and arts which, when they are experienced in relation to one another, provide a comprehensive appreciation of the profound theology associated with this feast. At the same time, this theology provides a legitimate critique of the devotional aspects associated with the feast.

The specific focus of this solemnity is the love of the heart of Christ for humanity. In the early Church, the love of God and the love of Christ were not expressed in a specialized way, since the focus was on the person of Christ rather than on his attributes. The whole mystery of Christ involved a constant reminder of the Lord's love for humanity. The beginnings of a devotion toward the love of God as symbolized by the heart of Jesus are found in the fathers of the Church, e.g., Origin, Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine, Hippolytus, Irenaeus, Justin, Cyprian, who appealed to the passages in the Gospel of John that speak of living water flowing from Christ (7:37-39; 19:33-37). However, a gradual transition is seen by the twelfth and thirteenth centuries as a result of preaching on the Heart of Jesus as an object of personal devotion; this devotion rapidly spread throughout Italy, Germany and France. "The development of theology and its methodology, together with the growing desire of the theologians to enter into details and to systematize, led to the contemplation (first private, then publicized) of the Lord's love as seen in the popular image of the heart, the seat of love."¹ Medieval theologians, e.g., Anselm of Canterbury (+1109), Bernard of Clairvaux (+1153), Bonaventure (+1274), Albert the Great (+1280), as well as mystics like Mechtild of Magdeburg (+1282), Gertrude of Helfta (+1302), Henrich Seuse (+1363), and Catherine of Siena (+1380), viewed the devotion as a deeper penetration into the mystery of Christ living in the Church through the liturgy.

A new stage of the devotion to the Sacred Heart occurred in the seventeenth century with the influence of John Eudes (+1680) and Mary Margaret Alacoque (+1690).

In 1670, John Eudes wrote *The Adorable Heart of Jesus*, which included a Mass and an Office in honor of the Sacred Heart, both of which quickly received episcopal approval. Thus, the first liturgical office celebrated in honor of the Sacred Heart of Jesus was observed for the first time on October 20, 1672.² Moreover, between 1673 – 1675, the appearances of the Lord to Mary Margaret Alacoque at Paray-le-Monial, France, led to a call for a devotion of expiatory love, namely, frequent communion (on the first Friday of the month) and a feast of reparation on the Friday after the Octave of Corpus Christi. These appearances led to first Friday devotions and contributed significantly to a renewed use of the Sacraments of Penance and of the Holy Eucharist.

In the beginning, the official Church³ expressed hesitancy about the devotion due to an emphasis on physiology and whether or not the heart was the organ of affections; thus on July 12, 1727, the Sacred Congregation of Rites did not accept the devotion in a form where the physical heart of Christ was the focus.⁴ By 1765, Pope Clement XIII gave permission for the feast to be celebrated in Poland and Portugal, by a decree of the Sacred Congregation of Rites on January 25, 1765 and a Mass (*Miserebor*) and Office were issued on May 11, 1765. A second Mass (*Egredimini*) was published by Pius VI in 1778 for Venice, Austria and Spain. Some years later, in opposition to the Jansenists who condemned the devotion of the Sacred Heart because it was offering divine worship to a mere creature (the Humanity of Christ), Pope Pius VI issued his bull *Auctorem fidei* on August 28, 1794. This bull not only encouraged devotion to the Sacred Heart, but established the devotion as an authentic Catholic practice. Eventually, in a decree from the Sacred Congregation of Rites on August 23, 1856, Pius IX responded to the request of the French bishops and established the feast as obligatory for the whole Church to be celebrated on the Friday after the Octave of Corpus Christi; a new Mass (*Miserebitur*) was published at the time, while some places continued to use the 1778 Mass and Office. Meanwhile, Pope Leo XIII, in his encyclical *Annum sacrum* (May 25, 1899), decreed the consecration of the world to the Sacred Heart. On May 8, 1928, Pius XI issued his encyclical *Miserentissimus Redemptor* calling for the act of reparation to the Sacred Heart and the Sacred Congregation of Rites issued a new Mass (*Cogitationes*) and Office on January 29, 1929. On the centenary of the universal feast, Pius XII published his encyclical *Haurietis aquas* (May 15, 1956), highlighting the dogmatic foundation of the devotion in Scripture and tradition. Finally, in 1970 a new Mass was issued with three sets of readings.⁵ Thus, as the Church gradually recognized the devotion to the Sacred Heart, appropriate liturgical rituals were issued in light of the particular circumstances of the time, attesting to the interrelationship of *lex credendi* and *lex orandi*.

The Mass and Office of John Eudes speaks of the mercy and "ineffable goodness" of God who gives the loving Heart of Jesus; thus the Collect focuses on being united with the Heart of Jesus to love perfectly. This original liturgy particularly concentrates on the love of Christ (antiphons, reading, responsory for Vespers I "God so loved the world," the two New Testament readings for Mass). The Mass makes no use of John 7 or John 19, but uses John 15, thus reflecting the particular context within the community of the Eudist congregation. While this feast was initially celebrated by the Eudists in October, the fact that the feast was later set within the Octave of Corpus Christi (due to the influence of the visions of Margaret Mary Alacoque and the 1856 decision of Pius IX) makes an important theological statement that the feast has a connection with the Eucharist.

While earlier formularies focused primarily on the passion of Christ and the benefits of that love, the 1929 Mass and Office emphasize the love of the Sacred Heart for sinful humanity, particularly as revealed when it was wounded by the soldier's lance (hymn for vespers, psalm antiphons for lauds and preface). The Collect (and Prayer over the Gifts) speaks of the infinite treasures of love bestowed upon us in the wounded Heart of Christ and prays that our devotion may make reparation for our sins. The readings are particularly rich in focusing on the importance of growing in the love of Christ (Ephesians) and seeing the source of this love within the self-giving love of Christ as he gave himself on the Cross. However, while this liturgy highlights the love of the Sacred Heart, it also places strong emphasis on reparation, atonement and a "safe refuge for the penitent" (preface). This reparation theme arises from the 1928 encyclical of Pius XI. Rahner helps to focus this reparation theme as "the trusting, obedient and loving acceptance of a share in the fate of the Lord."⁶

Building on the earlier rituals, the 1970 Mass and Office combine some of the earlier themes and offer significant development for the feast. The variety in the prayers and the increased number of readings are important contributions of Vatican II. The readings of Year A focus on a faithful God, who gives himself to his people (Deut.) and invites the observance of the commandments as a way to continue to draw from God's fidelity. The gospel focuses on the gentleness and humility of the heart of Christ, which enables followers to carry the burden and demands of Christian love and service. As a consequence of God's love and Christ's love, we are challenged to love one another (1 John). Year B uses the pivotal reading of John 19 and connects the love of the Sacred Heart with the paschal mystery (Phil. In II Vespers). The Father accepts the sacrifice of the Son, who through the Church offers the sacraments of baptism and eucharist as a way to grow in the life-giving Spirit. God's boundless love and forgiveness are seen in the

readings from Hosea and Ephesians. Year C focuses on the image of Jesus as shepherd, as one who seeks out the lost (Luke; Ezekiel) and dies for us while we were still sinners (Romans). These various readings are supported with the texts of the Mass which focus on sharing "the gifts of love received from the heart of Jesus" (Opening Prayer), recognizing the "heart of Christ filled with love for us" (Prayer Over the Gifts) and seeing that "Christ gave his life for us, so much did he love us" (Preface). At the same time, the prayers continue to mention traditional themes of forgiveness of sins and the need to make amends for our sins (Alternate Opening Prayer [from the 1929 Mass] and Prayer Over the Gifts).

The theology that emerges from an examination of the liturgy of the Sacred Heart has consequences, especially as one acknowledges the rich devotional dimension of this feast, e.g., Act of personal or family consecration, Litany of the Sacred Heart, Act of reparation or practices of First Fridays. In this regard, certain principles must be emphasized.⁷ The faithful need to be made conscious of the pre-eminence of the Liturgy over any other possible form of legitimate Christian prayer. The devotions associated with the Sacred Heart should be permeated by: a biblical spirit, in light of the rich scriptural tradition associated with this feast; a liturgical spirit which properly disposes the person for the mysteries celebrated in the liturgy; and anthropological spirit which both conserves symbols and expressions of importance, while guarding against archaisms, and which strives to dialogue in terms mindful of contemporary sensibility. This last principle is particularly significant because this devotion is associated with iconographic expression, namely, pictures and statues of the Sacred Heart. The Church has constantly warned against overly sentimental images which are incapable of giving expression to the devotion's proper theological content or which do not encourage the faithful to approach the mystery of the Sacred Heart of our Savior.⁸ When these symbolic and artistic expressions no longer respond to the artistic taste of the people, a diminished appreciation of the devotion's object can result, independently of theological basis and salvific content of the devotion. In this, one recognizes the intrinsic, aesthetical dimension of this devotion.

What can we conclude from this short reflection on this solemnity?⁹ First, the historical development of this feast through the various levels of devotion shows that people play an active part in the development of the liturgy of the Church. Once the feast had been officially recognized in the Church, the various formularies highlight the need for a real discernment on the part of the leaders to consider the faith expressed in the liturgical rite. These various revised rites point to the fact that the understanding and ritual expression of the mystery can and must be continually refined and may even indicate "how difficult it was to determine the

exact object of the feast."¹⁰ This need to revise the liturgical expression of the feast also attempts to deal with any contingent mentalities or influences of a particular period in history. Secondly, the present ritual of the feast incorporates additional readings and gives a larger perspective to the celebration. Thus, the feast is inserted more clearly into the dynamics of the history of salvation and can no longer be regarded merely from the perspective of devotional piety. Thirdly, the theology that emerges from the liturgical rite involves the new creation (Jeremiah), the role of the Holy Spirit pouring God's love into our hearts (Romans), the paschal mystery (Philippians), the source of sacramental life in the Church (John). This theology has implications for the *lex vivendi* in terms of a call to recognize him in others and to reach out to others in love. Moreover, the title of the feast "Sacred Heart of Jesus," while rooted in the Scriptures, refers to the entire mystery of Christ in the totality of his being, the Word Incarnate, Savior, intrinsically containing, in the Spirit, an infinite divine-human love for the Father and for all people.¹¹ Thus, the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart effectively celebrates the love of God revealed by Christ, who died to give life to all people through the scriptural images of his pierced side and his Sacred Heart. ---Catholic Culture.org

