

Ongoing Formation 2023

The heart of Jesus and our hearts

Devotion to the Sacred Heart has very ancient origins. It has spread in the Church especially starting from the seventeenth century through the work of a French mystic, St. Margaret Mary Alacoque. In her autobiography, this Visitation sister tells the revelations she had and refers to the famous twelve promises of the Sacred Heart from which the pious practice of the nine first Fridays of the month was derived. It is on the inspiration of this saint that the feast of the Sacred Heart was established.

Like all forms of popular piety, this too entered into crisis after the Vatican Council II. The traditional image—the one showing the Sacred Heart “on a throne of flames, radiant as the sun, with the adorable wound, surrounded by thorns and topped by a cross” is in conformity with the description given by St. Margaret Mary to whom He appeared. This image, too, first exposed in every home, was gradually replaced by others that expressed a new theological concept and a new spiritual sensitivity.

In the post-council period, many devotional practices have been abandoned. That of the Sacred Heart instead received a decisive boost by the conciliar spirit that led to seeking the solid foundation of every form of spirituality not in private revelations, to which—rightly—a more relative value has been given, but in God’s word.

The mystical experiences of St. Margaret Mary had, for three centuries, a great importance and significant repercussions on the life of the Church. They nourished the spirituality of God’s love and fostered a virtuous and committed moral life. However, theologians put forward reservations on these revelations reported by the saint. Today, they no longer are the foundation of devotion to the Sacred Heart, which instead is solidly rooted in the Word of God.

Bible study led to some interesting discoveries. It was immediately realized that the devotion to the Sacred Heart was different from the others. It does not emphasize one of the many aspects of the Gospel message, but took the center of Christian revelation: God’s heart, his passion of love for people that became visible in Christ.

In the Bible, the heart is not only intended as the seat of physical life and feelings, but it designates the whole person. It is primarily considered as the seat of intelligence. We may find it strange, but the Semites think and decide with the heart, “God has given people a heart to think”—says Sirach (17:6). He relates even some perceptions of the senses to the Israelite heart. Sirach, at the end of a long life, during which he accumulated the most diverse experiences and has gained much wisdom says: My heart has seen much (Sir 1:16).

In this cultural context, the image of the heart has also been applied to God. The Bible, in fact, says that God has a heart that thinks, decides, loves and can also be full of bitterness. This is exactly the feeling that is invoked when, at the beginning of Genesis, the word heart appears for the first time: “The Lord saw how great was the wickedness of man on the earth and the evil was always the only thought of his heart” (Gen 6:5).

What does God feel in the face of so much moral depravity? “The Lord regretted having created man on the earth and his heart grieved” (Gen 6:6). He is unfazed—as the philosophers of antiquity thought—he is not indifferent to what happens to his children. He rejoices when he sees them happy and suffers when they move away from him because he loves them madly. Even if provoked by their faithlessness, he never reacts with aggression and violence.

The designs of the Lord, the thoughts of his heart are always and only projects of salvation. For this—the Psalmist says—“Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord” (Ps 33:11-12).

Until the coming of Christ people knew God's heart only by "hearsay" (Job 42:5). In Jesus, our eyes have contemplated it. "Whoever sees me, sees him who sent me" (Jn 12:45), Jesus has assured his disciples. In his farewell address at the Last Supper, he reminded them of the same truth: "If you know me, you will know the Father also ... Whoever sees me sees the Father" (Jn 14:7-9). We can come to know the Father's heart by contemplating his heart.

When we speak of the heart of Jesus, we refer not only to his whole person but also to his deepest emotions. The Gospel refers often to what he feels in the face of human needs. His heart is sensitive to the cry of the marginalized. He hears the cry of the leper who, contrary to the requirements of the law, comes up to him and, on his knees, begs him: "If you want to, you can make me clean." Jesus—the evangelist notes—gets excited from the depths of his bowels. He listens to his heart, not to the provisions of the rabbis who prescribe marginalization. He stretches out his hand, touches him and heals him (Mk 1:40-42).

The heart of Jesus is moved when he meets pain. He shares the disturbance that every person feels in the face of death; he feels sympathy for the widow who has lost her only child and is left alone. At Nain, when he sees the funeral procession advancing, he comes forward, comes close to the mother and tells her: "Stop crying!" And he gives her the son. No one asked him to intervene; no one has asked him to perform the miracle. It is his heart that drove him to move closer to those in pain.

The Gospel relates also a heartfelt prayer of Jesus. A father has a child with serious physical and mental problems: he stiffens, foams and is thrown into fire or water. With the last glimmer of hope that remained he goes to Jesus, and, by appealing to the feelings of his heart, directs him a prayer, simple but beautiful: "If you can do anything, have pity on us and help us ... "If you can!" (Mk 9:22-23). It is not an expression of doubt about his feelings, but it is a pointer to a consoling truth: he is always listening to those who suffer.

In Jesus, we have seen God crying for the death of his friend, and for the people unable to recognize the one who offered salvation; we have seen God excited for the tears of a mother, touched by the sick, the marginalized, those who hunger.

The God who asks us confidence is not far away and insensitive. He is the one to whom everyone can shout: "Let yourself be moved!" The God who revealed himself in Jesus is not the impassive one the philosophers talked about. He is a God who has a heart that is moved, rejoices and grieves, weeps with those who weep and smiles with those who are happy. An anonymous Egyptian poet wrote, towards 2,000 B.C.: "I seek a heart on which to rest my head and I cannot find it, they are no longer friends."

We are luckier: we have a heart—that of Jesus—on which to lay our head to hear from him at all times, words of consolation, hope, and forgiveness. Today's feast wants to introduce us, through the meditation of the Word of God, in the intimacy of Jesus' heart, so that we learn to love as he loved.

To internalize the message, we repeat:
 "Give us, Jesus, a heart like yours."

Fernando Armellini

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