

Reflection on the Sacred Heart

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I'm humbled to be given this privilege of sharing with you, my brothers, some thoughts on the Sacred Heart as we prepare for this afternoon's Consecration. I have been asked in particular to speak this morning to Pope Francis' assertion in *Dilexit Nos* that the Sacred Heart reveals "the gratuitous love of God that enlivens and brings joy to the heart."

Allow me to begin by noting that I believe that *Dilexit Nos* is one of the greatest gifts to the Church from Pope Francis. Written just months before his death, in many ways it presents to the Church a "spiritual last testament," a legacy shaped by his 66 years as a Jesuit, the Jesuits being the great proponents of the Church's devotion to the Sacred Heart.

As you will recall, the Jesuits were involved in this devotion from the beginning. It was providential, I would argue, that the Visitation Sister, Margaret Mary Alacoque was assigned a Jesuit for a spiritual director, St. Claude La Colombiere in 1675. It was St. Claude who patiently guided her through the amazing journey of her unique spiritual experiences. It was as his Jesuit hands lifted high the consecrated host one day at Holy Mass that Margaret Mary first perceived the Sacred Heart as a burning furnace of love. It was St. Claude who commanded Margaret Mary to commit her revelations to writing, and it was he who would vouch for their validity...and consecrate himself to the Sacred Heart. Eventually, it was St. Claude who would share with the world what had been committed to St. Margaret Mary.

St. Claude would later go on to form young Jesuits and managed to sow in them, primarily through his own example, the seeds of devotion to the Sacred Heart, so consistent with Ignatian spirituality. While it wasn't until 1883 that the members of

the 23rd General Congregation of the Society of Jesus would formally declare that they accepted and received “ *with a spirit overflowing with joy and gratitude, the gentle burden (munus suavissimum in Latin) that our Lord Jesus Christ has entrusted to [them], to practice, promote and propagate devotion to His most divine Heart*” it’s demonstrable, however, that the devotion had taken root in the Society much earlier than that.

In the years that I lived in Rome, I would often go to confession to an elderly English Jesuit, Fr. Barrett, at the Church of Gesu. I stopped going to him once I realized that his failing ears led him to repeat my sins and his counsel at a volume that could be heard throughout the Church. I don’t know if he did this for everyone, but he always gave me a substantial penance and insisted that I fulfill it in the Chapel of the Sacred Heart.

It was there that I encountered the amazing rendering of the Sacred Heart by Pompeo Batoni, probably the most famous painting of the Sacred Heart. Commissioned for that chapel in 1760, and revealing the close connection between the Jesuits and this devotion, it was inspired by the particulars of St. Margaret Mary’s description: “*The Divine Heart was presented to me [she wrote] on a throne of flames, more resplendent than a sun, transparent as crystal, with this adorable wound. And it was surrounded with a crown of thorns, signifying the punctures made in it by our sins, and a cross above signifying that from the first instant of His Incarnation, ... the cross was implanted into it....*” The painting is magnificent...and Fr. Barrett was wise to send me there as I prayed my penance. Sure, the image reminded me that my sins had punctured the heart of Christ. But the thought of Jesus’ love for me, in spite of my sinfulness, always seemed to enliven my heart and to be a source of joy. Jesus’ wounded heart speaking to my wounded heart.

One of my favorite paragraphs in the encyclical is the one in which Pope Francis speaks about our newest Doctor of the Church, St. John Henry Newman. Pope Francis noted that Newman, like our own bishop James Conley, “took as his motto

the phrase *Cor ad cor loquitur*, since, beyond all our thoughts and ideas, the Lord saves us by speaking to our hearts from his Sacred Heart.”

The Pontiff noted that this realization led Newman, “the distinguished intellectual, to recognize that his deepest encounter with himself and with the Lord came not from his reading or reflection, but from his prayerful dialogue, heart to heart, with Christ, alive and present.” What could be a greater joy?

Drawing near to the heart of Jesus, entering into that intimate dialogue with Jesus, changes everything.

Those of you who are my age or older might remember a program on PBS called *Watch Mr. Wizard*. Week after week, Mr. Wizard would share a science experiment that taught something about science. I’ll always remember the one where he had a flame jump from one match to another, even though they never touched. I’m pretty sure that my fingers are still singed from trying that out at home. Catholic Mutual would never approve.

But I think that there’s a parallel with the Sacred Heart: if we approach the heart of Jesus, on fire with his love, it’s going to set even our dry or hardened hearts on fire.

Brothers, the reality is that even the hearts of bishops can be hardened. Sometimes its because of sin. Sometimes its because of neglect or laziness—soon-to-be-beatified Bishop Fulton Sheen noted that “Physical idleness deteriorates the mind; spiritual idleness deteriorates the heart.”

But sometimes the hardness is a result of a choice that we make to put up walls, We’re often in such painful situations in our ministry, that we put up barriers—sometimes it’s so that we can be strong for others but often its just to insulate ourselves from feeling pain, whether that be the pain of a brother priest struggling in his vocation, or of a family grieving the tragic loss of a child, or of a survivor sharing

an experience from their childhood of abuse. The crustiness of our heart might help us to get through the day, but it does nothing to communicate to others the love that pours forth from the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

And isn't that what our sisters and brothers need, that encounter with the love of a God who made himself vulnerable for us, who truly holds out to us—as in St. Margaret Mary's vision— his beating wounded heart, and who desires to walk with us in his suffering?

As much as Bishop Izen, Bishop Kenney, the priests of our Archdiocese and I would desire to undo the tragic events of last August 27th at Annunciation Church that saw the loss of life of Harper Moyski and Fletcher Merkel, or bring back to life our neighbors who were killed on the streets of Minneapolis, Rene Good and Alex Pretti, or the young mom, Nicole Amor, from our area who was killed in a drone strike in Kuwait while serving our country, we cannot. But we can bring those who are hurting to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, to have their hearts enlivened by the one who knew suffering like none other, the one to whom we are consecrating our nation this afternoon.

But if we're going to be conduits for that love, we have to be willing to hold out our hearts, no matter how painful, and to demonstrate how our hearts have been molded, softened and enlivened by an encounter with the Sacred Heart. As Newman suggested, that's going to require that we be committed, brothers, to facilitating those intimate Heart-to-Heart encounters with the Lord in our daily prayer and especially in the Eucharist, where Newman recognized that the Sacred Heart is concealed.

Experience tells us, moreover, that we can also approach the heart of Jesus and be changed by that heart in our encounters with His poor, his little ones. The Missionaries of Charity pray in the Divine Praises "Blessed be Jesus in the poorest of

the poor.” He and his Sacred Heart wait for us, brothers, there as well—to enliven our hearts and to give us joy. I know that it’s tough when we are trapped in our offices, but we’re less effective in our ministry when we’re not regularly in contact with those that Jesus would call the least of his brothers and sisters.

Finally, let’s not forget to be intentional today and everyday about making it a priority to spend time with the Lord and to ask him to shape our hearts. Perhaps we could join Newman in praying “Make my heart beat with thine,” or we could make our own the words of the Litany “Jesus, meek and humble of heart, make our hearts like unto Thine.”

St. Claude knew that even the best of hearts could be hardened. Allow me to conclude with his prayer:

“O God, what will You do to conquer the fearful hardness of our hearts?

Lord, You must give us new hearts, tender hearts, sensitive hearts, to replace hearts that are made of marble and bronze.

You must give us Your own Heart, Jesus. Come, lovable Heart of Jesus. Place Your Heart deep in the center of our hearts and enkindle in each heart a flame of love as strong, as great, as the sum of all the reasons that I have for loving You, my God.

O holy Heart of Jesus, dwell hidden in my heart, so that I may live only in You and only for You, so that, in the end, I may live with you eternally in heaven.”

Thank you, brothers.