

NOTES

SIMPLIFIED DEVOTION TO THE SACRED HEART

What have we in mind when at the end of Mass we say: "Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, have mercy on us"? The majority of Catholic theologians reply that we address this prayer directly to "Christ's living Heart of flesh as the symbol of His love for us"; and, according to Galtier, this explanation is "true and certain."¹ Motherway similarly asserts that this is "common and certain" doctrine, because "with the exception of two or three theologians deriving from the University of Innsbruck, all the rest who have tried to explain the devotion to the Sacred Heart have recognized as its proper object the Heart of flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ symbolizing His love."²

In due course we shall discuss the "Innsbruck opinion," but for present purposes it suffices to state that the Innsbruck theologians are men of no mean theological standing. Besides, their opinion seems to be gaining ground rather than the contrary, since it has recently been adopted in the new series of theological textbooks produced by the Spanish Jesuits.³ Instead, then, of the "common opinion" being "certain," as Galtier claims, it would be more reasonable to qualify it as "probable," so that the devotion is still susceptible of other interpretations. This is the view of Bainvel, a leading authority on the subject, who has written the articles on it in the *Catholic Encyclopedia* and the *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique*. He writes: "This is a living devotion. It admits of development, and, in fact, is actually in process of development."⁴

The foregoing remarks are intended to show that "the question of the object of the devotion to the Heart of Jesus is still open," as Noldin wrote in 1920.⁵ It would therefore seem licit to suggest very tentatively for discussion an alternative form of the devotion, which appears to fulfill exactly its providential purpose of destroying Jansenism and increasing love of our Lord among the faithful.

The remedy for Jansenism is to look on Christ not as a severe Judge but as a kind Friend. But how could this mental attitude be taught to the

¹ P. Galtier, *De incarnatione ac redemptione* (Paris, 1947) n. 297.

² T. J. Motherway, "The Proper Object of the Devotion to the Sacred Heart," *Irish Ecclesiastical Record* 51 (1938) 157.

³ *Sacrae theologiae summa* 3 (Madrid, 1953) n. 541 ff.

⁴ J. Bainvel, *Devotion to the Sacred Heart: The Doctrine and Its History*, tr. E. Leahy (New York, 1924) p. 61.

⁵ H. Noldin, "Ueber den Gegenstand der Herz-Jesu-Andacht," *Theologisch-praktische Quartalschrift* 73 (1920) 330.

faithful, to most of whom the theological language of papal documents would be unintelligible? Christ Himself provided the answer, namely, the widespread diffusion of images of His Heart as a symbol for His love for men. This pictorial device (which anticipated modern methods of advertizing) could be readily understood by all Catholics and was specially designed for this purpose, as Pius XI has explained in the Encyclical on "Reparation to the Sacred Heart":

When in the seventeenth century divine charity had grown cold, and the vile heresy of Jansenism threatened to dry up the fountains of Christian piety by representing God as an implacable Judge rather than a loving Father, the benignity and kindness of the divine Redeemer manifested itself in the revelations of Paray-le-Monial.

The purpose of this devotion, therefore, was to counteract Jansenism by representing God as "a loving Father" rather than as "an implacable Judge"—in this way curing contraries by contraries. The aim of devotion to the Sacred Heart is, accordingly, the representation of our Redeemer under the aspect of His love for men; in other words, the devotion is directed to the Person of Christ as loving mankind. But how can the expression, "Sacred Heart," be identified with the whole Christ? Bainvel explains this as follows (although elsewhere he holds the "common opinion"):

In everyday language the word "heart," by a figure of speech which grammarians call synecdoche, is often used to designate the person. . . . When we say, "What a great heart!", it is to the person we are directly alluding, not to his heart. This is done quite naturally in the devotion to the Sacred Heart. Margaret Mary says "Sacred Heart" just as she would say "Jesus." In the two cases it is the Person she has directly in view. It has now become the general custom to designate Jesus by the name of the Sacred Heart. . . . This transference of the Heart to the Person . . . affords the devotion greater freedom and a wider sphere of action. The Sacred Heart brings before us the whole interior life of Jesus. . . . Jesus Himself, all-loving . . . is known in the Sacred Heart.⁶

If the proximate object of the devotion is thus understood as "Jesus Himself, all-loving," it becomes the basis of "a wider sphere of action" which includes not only confidence and reparation but also imitation of virtues of the Sacred Heart. Besides, when we pray *to* the Sacred Heart, do we not pray directly to the Person of Christ, since "the living Heart of flesh" cannot of itself hear us? If so, why not clearly say so, instead of using obscure circumlocutions?

⁶ J. Bainvel, "Coeur Sacré de Jésus (Dévotion au)," *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique* 3, 284. Similarly, A. Hamon, *Histoire de la dévotion au Sacré Coeur* 4 (Paris, 1931) 150 ff.

It might perhaps be objected that Jesus said to Margaret Mary, "Behold this Heart. . ." and also that He expressed a desire "to be honored under the image of this Heart of flesh." Yes, but here He seems to envisage mainly the propagation and conservation of the devotion by the diffusion of images of His Heart. Of course, the Heart of flesh, being the Heart of a divine Person, may be directly adored with latria as may the Precious Blood; yet, just as in the latter case we do not pray directly to the Precious Blood, so too it would appear more reasonable to pray directly to the Person rather than to the Heart of flesh. Hence the prayer at the end of Mass, "Cor Jesu sacratissimum, miserere nobis," would appear to be equivalent to "Jesu amantissime, miserere nobis"; and similarly for other indulgenced prayers to the Sacred Heart.

The above interpretation seems to be that of the main body of the faithful, who, for instance, speak of "a statue of the Sacred Heart," obviously meaning the whole Christ, not the Heart alone. This widespread manner of speaking of, and praying to, "the Sacred Heart" could reasonably be taken as an indication of the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the development of the devotion: *lex orandi, lex credendi*. This development is described as follows by Solano (who elsewhere follows the "Innsbruck theologians"):

The use of speech is changeable, and so it can happen that the name, "Heart of Jesus," may designate directly the Person of Christ showing His Heart. . . . This manner of concept and speech is increasing in common use, so that Heart of Jesus is gradually acquiring a directly personal meaning, but in such a way that the Person of Christ is envisaged with respect to His interior life and especially His love, which has been so much despised. In like manner the term, "Immaculate Conception," originally designated a special attribute of the Blessed Virgin, but little by little it has come to mean the person of Mary adorned with this attribute.⁷

But, is this the interpretation of the devotion intended by the Church, the one to which she has attached various indulgences? Dogmatic theologians reply negatively. Bainvel, however, declares that, although Church documents clearly speak of the worship of "the Heart of flesh as the symbol of love," nevertheless the same documents in other parts suggest that the devotion may also be practised by praying to the Sacred Heart as synonymous with the Person of "Jesus, all-loving." His words are:

. . . [Church] documents have made one point perfectly clear—devotion to the Sacred Heart is, first and foremost, devotion to the loving Heart of Jesus. . . . But there are other passages—often in the same documents—that point to something else as being also the object. Sometimes the reference is to our Lord's sacred

⁷ *Sacrae theologiae summa* 3, n. 545.

Person . . . to Jesus himself, wholly and entirely, designated personally by the name of the Sacred Heart.⁸

In this latter sense devotion to the Sacred Heart (apart from its modern method of propagation and conservation) clearly becomes a very prominent Gospel devotion, revealed by Christ Himself (for instance, in the parable of the prodigal son) and practised by the Apostles as the "friends" of Christ. Our Lady also, according to this interpretation, would be our model of reparation to the Sacred Heart, the title of Reparatrix given her by Pius XI being thus readily explained without forcing its meaning.⁹

With these thoughts in mind one may well ask: Why should the faithful who interpret the devotion in accordance with the practice of the Mother of God be deprived of the rewards promised by Christ in His revelations to Margaret Mary? Why, too, should they lose by this interpretation the indulgences attached by the Church to prayers to the Sacred Heart, since Church documents appear to indicate the possibility of this alternative interpretation?

In summary, then, the following are the solutions of the problem under consideration:

a) The "common opinion" is that the proximate object of the devotion is "Christ's living Heart of flesh as the symbol of His love for us."

b) According to the "Innsbruck opinion" the proximate object of the devotion is "the ethical Heart" of Christ, which Lercher describes as "the organic Heart, the animating soul . . . and the divine wisdom and charity of the Word. . . ."¹⁰ Solano briefly explains the same object as "the Heart of flesh with the affective life and the whole interior life" of our divine Redeemer,¹¹ so that "explicitly and directly not the whole Person but the Heart is worshipped."¹² In this opinion, as in the previous one, the remote (material) object is the Person of Christ.

c) The "alternative explanation" suggests that (according to the context) the proximate object is either the Heart of flesh as the symbol of Christ's love or the Person of Christ considered as loving mankind. In the latter simplified form of the devotion there would be no remote material object; the only material object would be Christ Himself.

As regards the formal object, all theologians agree that it is the love of Christ, many favoring the whole love of Christ, i.e., the complexus of divine

⁸ J. Bainvel, *op. cit.*, pp. 79-80.

⁹ Cf. Pius XI, Encyclical, *Miserentissimus Redemptor (Acta apostolicae sedis 20 [1928] 178)*.

¹⁰ L. Lercher, *Institutiones theologiae dogmaticae* 3 (1934) n. 160.

¹¹ *Sacrae theologiae summa* 3, n. 566.

¹² *Ibid.*, n. 545.

and human loves, because the ordinary faithful are not wont to make any abstraction or precision on this point.

Finally, going back to the time of the revelations to St. Margaret Mary, the contention of the present discussion may be epitomized in the following words of J. Croiset, her spiritual director:

. . . it is easy to see what is meant by the devotion to the Sacred Heart: by this devotion we mean the ardent love which we conceive for Jesus Christ [proximate material object] at the remembrance of all the marvels which He has wrought to show His tender love for us. . . . That is what we mean by the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and that is what it consists in. It cannot be reduced—as some people might think at seeing this title—to merely loving and honouring by special worship this Heart of flesh like ours, which forms part of the adorable Body of Jesus Christ.

It is not that the Sacred Heart is not worthy of our adoration. . . . What we wish to make clear is that the word “heart” is taken here only in the figurative sense, . . . the principal motive [formal object] being the immense love which Jesus bears to us.

Now as this love is altogether spiritual, it cannot be perceived by the senses; it was necessary, therefore, to find a symbol [to propagate the devotion], and what symbol could be more proper and more natural for love than the heart?¹³

It is to be noted that, when Croiset says that the word “heart” is to be taken “only in the figurative sense,” he does not mean that it should be taken purely metaphorically, as if devotion to the Sacred Heart were merely devotion to the love of Christ, excluding all worship of the real Heart of flesh—an opinion put forward by certain theologians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries but now obsolete. Croiset previously explained that the proximate material object of the devotion is “*Jesus Christ* at the remembrance of all the marvels He has wrought to show His tender love for us.” He therefore uses the word “heart” not as a mere metaphor but according to the figure of speech called synecdoche. The real Heart of Christ is thus worshipped *exercite* as part of the whole Christ, not *signate* as in the “common opinion.”

It is also noteworthy that in the fifth lesson of the Office for the Feast of the Sacred Heart Piux XI insinuates that this devotion is not “fully and perfectly constituted” unless it is practised in the manner revealed to St. Margaret Mary. Her own spiritual director, Fr. Croiset, would have been in a good position to understand the practical implications of the revelations which she received.

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¹³ J. Croiset, *The Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, tr. P. O’Connell (Westminster, Md., 1948) p. 50.