



Alive with love: the Sacred Heart of Jesus

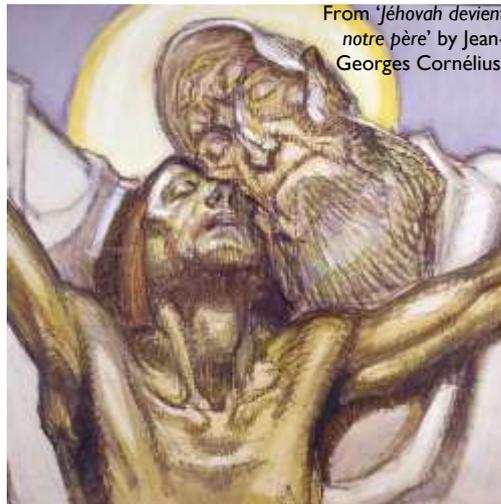
James Hanvey SJ

The devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus was promoted by St Claude La Colombière and St Margaret Mary Alacoque, whose relics will come to London with the Sacred Heart of Mercy Mission this week. James Hanvey SJ explains why this devotion will always be central to the life of the Church and why it is the foundation of our intimacy with Christ. 'Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, has a heart... With him it is always personal.'

The first time I visited Paray-le-Monial I arrived in late morning and it was raining. We had travelled through the French countryside from Ars. It was poor part of France at the time of the Curé, and even today the landscape appeared austere. The small town of Paray-le-Monial had a quiet, understated charm. Like Ars, it was a place of pilgrimage but somehow remained unspoiled.

Some churches have a formal beauty. They are places that you can explore and admire; one might stay for a few moments of prayer but they're not really 'home'. The ancient basilica was quite different; it invited you to pray. It was not difficult to see how Paray-le-Monial was a *sanctuaire*. Both the convent in which [Margaret Mary Alacoque](#) lived and the house of the Jesuit community of [Claude La Colombière](#) had a modesty and uncluttered quality – interesting but not distracting. Of course, both saints would have appreciated this simplicity; they would not have wanted anything to obscure the centre of their own life and devotion, the [Sacred Heart of Jesus](#).

The image of the Sacred Heart can be found in many of our churches. Once it was a familiar feature of many Catholic homes, as were the prayers and practices that went with it: the offering, the first Friday novena¹, the hope and consolations of the 12 promises,² the acts of reparation. Fashions in devotions



change as they do in everything else. The Church, however, has a faith-memory; it can keep important truths and insights alive and renew them. The form and imagery may change, but devotion to the Sacred Heart remains always central in the Church's own life and heart. This should not surprise us. The devotion is more than a series of prayers and practices. It is something experienced and contemplated. It is nothing less than our participation in the redemptive love of God made real in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ. As Pope Benedict XVI writes,

In the Heart of Jesus, the centre of Christianity is set before us. It expresses everything, all that is genuinely new and revolutionary in the new covenant. This heart calls to our heart. It invites us to step forth out of the futile attempt of self-preservation and, by joining in the task of love, by handing ourselves over to him and with him, to discover the fullness of love which alone is eternity and which alone sustains the world.³

Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, is a real person. He has a heart. This is the most challenging and consoling thing about him. In *him* we find the infinite and eternal God who chooses us and offers us a share in the Triune life. In all its material, historical and physical density, the '*him*' is the reality we cannot escape, erase or deny. *Jesus* is not a myth like one of the Greek gods taking on human or animal shape, nor

is he some cipher for a philosophical idea of the transcendent that every human may recognise though it makes no further demand upon us. Jesus's reality and the claim that it entails shocks and resists all attempts to construct the category into which he will fit. The person of Jesus haunts and pushes us beyond our limits into new realms of thinking and existing. With him we always have to begin anew. With Jesus it is always personal; we always have to begin in either response to or refusal of the encounter. We cannot slip or evade the personal relationship that his person requires of us. This is the meaning of the image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. It is always a personal, affective, devotional relation with the whole of Jesus, contained in the image of his heart alive with love.

We cannot look upon the wounded heart of Jesus without encountering a love that is so completely human. The humanity of Christ is before us in all its vulnerability and strength. The image of the Sacred Heart offers a deep intimacy and like all such relationships we may long for it but it can frighten us. To be so exposed and so committed and, of course, so vulnerable. Yet, the Sacred Heart of Jesus is also a waiting heart. In it we can experience something of the patient, generous love of God which will not coerce or threaten us. The love in the heart of Christ seeks only our love, and what good is a love that is not freely given? The heart of Jesus creates the sacred, personal space for that deeply hidden and intensely personal exchange of 'heart to heart' – *cor ad cor loquitur*.

From our own experience with others we know that this intimacy can be fleeting even when we desire it. Often it can take many years of sharing and coming to know each other in the course of all life's twists and turns. True intimacy only really happens when we trust someone; it is a resting in them, an 'at-homeness.' So it is with Jesus. The Sacred Heart – his heart – is the unchanging guarantee of a love that waits for us, that makes a home for us, for all that we are and all that we carry. His heart is a sanctuary for us.

The heart of Christ is an open heart. All can find their place in it for all have a place in it. There are no limits to the love of God that we discover in the heart of God's Son. When we allow ourselves to be drawn to that love, we find that we are also drawn beyond ourselves to a greater, deeper love, especially those whose own heart is wounded. Then we begin to understand the beauty and mystery of the Sacred

Heart that is itself wounded. The wound is infinite because Jesus's love is infinite. It is also the mark of truth. This heart is no symbol of a false love. That it carries the wound of love – a love that knows the depths of betrayal and rejection – means that it also carries our truth as well as God's truth. We see here the consequences of our sin and that calls us into a greater truth. It also creates in us a greater freedom. Unless we recognise this truth we cannot change; we always remain in our illusions and self-justifications, minimising the consequences and protecting our interests. That is how systems as well as individuals perpetuate and inflict suffering, whether it is on other persons or nature and natural life itself. In the wound of the Sacred Heart we see our own hardness of heart; we have to confront our solipsistic indifference. Yet Christ, too, does expose his heart not to crush us with just guilt but to heal our own woundedness and show us that sacrifice is not only the cost but also the gift of love. Devotion to the Sacred Heart is the school of such a free, courageous and responsive love; we learn again how to love, how to give without seeking return, how to grow beyond ourselves.

Here is the meaning of reparation: when we become servants of this love in our families, communities and our world, we become ministers of compassion and agents of healing. We want to return this love; to make amends for what we or others have broken. This is not guilt but recognition and gratitude. The Sacred Heart of Jesus opens the eyes of our hearts. Just as we cannot make Christ into a faceless abstraction so we cannot make anyone we love into a faceless project. We do not see a problem or a threat but only a person, a history; we cannot read a statistic without realising that it is also a story, a life: not a someone or somebody that could be anyone or anybody, but *this* person who has a name given to him or her by a father, a mother or someone who loved them from the very beginning of their life and did not wish them to be invisible and unknown. Out of this personal relationship and resistance to the impersonal, the work of reparation begins: whatever is broken we can work to repair; whatever is lost, we can go in search of. Whoever feels humiliated and despised, we can esteem and restore. Whoever is abandoned, used and abused, we can work to bring into the heart of the community with justice and compassion. We can speak the name of those who are forgotten, whose lives are counted as without value, and write their stories in the book of life.

We know that this cannot be done without cost, without enduring commitment or fidelity. But if we have come to know the Sacred Heart of Jesus, we will also know that we have his Spirit too, and ‘nothing is impossible to God.’ For the Sacred Heart of the crucified and risen Christ is a sort of living icon of the Holy Spirit. More than the great rainbow seen by Noah signalling the cosmic covenant and a new beginning, the Spirit is the new and eternal covenant that God’s love for us in Christ does not fail, ‘And hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.’ (Romans 5:5).

St Jean Eudes thought that the deepest living of the Christian life – we could also say the truly human life – is the mutual indwelling of our heart in the heart of Christ. Although our heart – the love that becomes our very essence – must always be finite, it can, nevertheless, have a limitless capacity for receiving and being transformed by God’s love. St Isaac of Nineveh expresses it beautifully:

And what is a merciful heart? - It is the heart’s burning for the sake of the entire creation, for men, for birds, for animals, for demons, and for every created thing; and by the recollection of them the eyes of a merciful man pour forth abundant tears. From the strong and vehement mercy which grips his heart and from his great compassion, his heart is humbled and he cannot bear to hear or to see any injury or slight sorrow in creation. For this reason he offers up tearful prayer continually even for irrational beasts, for the enemies of the truth, and for those who harm him, that they be protected and receive mercy. And in like manner he even prays for the family of reptiles because of the great compassion that burns without measure in his heart in the likeness of God.

This is a heart that is fully alive. In our hearts the world longs to see the heart of Jesus. In this [Year of Mercy](#), Pope Francis has reminded us that this is our gift; to carry the merciful heart of Jesus in our own heart. It is such a heart, overflowing with compassion, that is the dynamic core of our Christian witness and the mission of the Church.

Before I left Paray-le-Monial I was given an unexpected gift. In Musée de Hieron, not far from the old Jesuit residence, are some works by the 20th century artist Jean-Georges Cornélius. One painting powerfully impressed itself upon me: *Jéhovah devient notre père* (above). It seemed to sum up so much of what contemporary theology had been trying to express about the reality of the cross at the heart of God’s Trinitarian life. This painting did not use words or sophisticated philosophical theology. It simply showed the crucified Christ held in the arms of the Father; a traditional artistic theme. In a profoundly personal moment between the Father and the Son, the painting caught a delicate heart-consoling, heart-breaking ambivalence in their closeness: the love was evident and palpable but, as for any parent holding a suffering and dying child, the pain of the Father as well as that of the Son was visible. And there was also a gentle, trusting peace. Supported in the Father’s arms the Son was held, lovingly secure. There was not a closed relationship. Even in such profound intimacy and suffering, their love draws us in. We cannot be onlookers or spectators; we are moved not just by empathy but by grace. In their suffering their heart was one. So are we all held close to the Father’s heart.

James Hanvey SJ is Master of Campion Hall, University of Oxford.

¹ In one of the apparitions of St Margaret Mary, Christ spoke: 'In the excess of the mercy of my Heart, I promise you that my all powerful love will grant to all those who will receive Communion on the First Fridays, for nine consecutive months, the grace of final repentance: they will not die in my displeasure, nor without receiving the sacraments; and my Heart will be their secure refuge in that last hour.'

² I will give them all of the graces necessary for their state of life.

I will establish peace in their houses.

I will comfort them in all their afflictions.

I will be their strength during life and above all during death.

I will bestow a large blessing upon all their undertakings.

Sinners shall find in My Heart the source and the infinite ocean of mercy.

Tepid souls shall grow fervent.

Fervent souls shall quickly mount to high perfection.

I will bless every place where a picture of my heart shall be set up and honored.

I will give to priests the gift of touching the most hardened hearts.

Those who shall promote this devotion shall have their names written in My Heart, never to be blotted out.

I promise you in the excessive mercy of My Heart that My all-powerful love will grant to all those who shall receive communion on the First Friday in nine consecutive months the grace of final penitence; they shall not die in My disgrace nor without receiving their sacraments; My Divine Heart shall be their safe refuge in this last moment.

³ Joseph Ratzinger, *Behold the Pierced One* (Ignatius Press, 1986), p.69.