

Life of the Spirit

Volume II

JUNE 1948

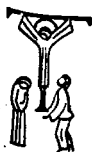
Number 24

THE SACRED HEART¹

BY

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I have bestowed my love upon you, just as my Father has bestowed his love upon me; live on then in my love. John, 15, 9. (Mgr Knox's Version).



THE Feast of the Sacred Heart of our Lord sets before us clearly, and indeed vividly, the redemptive purpose and character of his incarnate life. The devotion itself finds its roots in the Middle Ages, in the writings of Saint Bernard for example, and later in those of Saint Catherine of Siena, as well as in one at least of the surviving works of the English mystical writers. The living tendrils of the devotion had already sought the light, when it received its final impetus from Saint Margaret Mary and Blessed Father Claude de la Colombière and was given full recognition by the establishment of the Feast as a part of the Liturgy of the Catholic Church.

The Feast itself takes the Sacred Heart of our Lord as the point of its adoration and as the object of our devotion; for the heart of Christ comprehends and draws within it all the love that animates the deep mystery of God's being, all the love that gave us his incarnate Son, all the love that raises us up by divine grace and quickens our own hearts in response. That is the 'stimulus' of this Feast, the '*stimulus amoris divini*'; and yet the infinite mystery of divine love is here given to us in a manner that the simplest person can grasp, in a manner that we know best, we human creatures with human hearts. It is expressed for us in the human heart of the incarnate Son of God, '*qui habitavit in nobis, et vidimus gloriam ejus, quasi unigeniti a Patre, plenum gratiae et veritatis . . . et de plenitudine ejus omnes nos accepimus*'.

The human heart is the mainspring of our bodily life. Its regular beat sends the life-blood coursing through the arteries to every part of our bodies. It is responsive to the impact of external shock; of

¹ The substance of a sermon preached at the English College, Rome, on the feast of the Sacred Heart, 1947.

imminent danger, for example. The change of its rhythm reflects the play of human emotion and the activity of our human passions, love, hatred, anger, fear, happiness, sorrow: all these touch the heart closely. So it is easy to see why the heart has come for man—and for God as well—to stand as the source and spring of his love.

Every moment, every incident, of our Lord's life with us, his passion, his death, express the overflowing of God's infinite love for us through the heart of his only-begotten Son in the single redemptive act of his incarnation. The Sacred Heart is the fount of a redeeming love that alone can satisfy man's thirst for love. Here in Rome we have all seen in the Catacombs and in the great mosaics of the early centuries of the Church's life the sheep or the stags drinking from the stream of living waters that springs forth at the feet of Christ.

*O fons amoris inclyte,
O vena aquarum limpida,
O flamma adurens crimina!
O cordis ardens caritas!*

God made us to know him and to love him; and so he created in us a disposition to love and be loved, a disposition that stamps the nature and fills the heart of every child of man. Not one of us is exempt. God made us so. We are the object of his infinite love and are ourselves infinitely athirst for love. The drive and the force of that love are, as we know to our cost, often misdirected. Our love is dragged down by us to a level that sets us with the animals, to feed like the Prodigal Son off their husks; and at other times it is turned back within us to reflect the image of self as its object. Yet even in the order of nature this love can direct us rightly. We think of the love of friends, the love of a man and a woman in its right setting, the love of parents and children. We have all been touched by the inspiration of this human love, especially when we were children; and our hearts have been quickened to respond, for the first great stimulus to our love is the realisation that we are loved.

That love, we know, is not enough. God gives and looks for more than this natural love from us. If it were sufficient, we should not be here, studying for the priesthood; or, if we are already priests, still learning to follow the way of union by the way of knowledge and love. What daunts us, and may discourage us, is the abyss, the measureless gulf that seems to separate our human love as we have experienced its force, at times to our shame and sorrow, from the infinite purity of God's love. Yet we know the answer to this: 'The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us'. For us there is, in the words of Saint Catherine of Siena, the 'Bridge' across this chasm. 'Wherefore I have told thee that I have made a Bridge of my Word, of my only-begotten Son. . . . ~~Wishing~~ to remedy your great evils, I have

given you the Bridge of my Son, in order that passing across the flood you may not be drowned, which flood is the tempestuous sea of this dark life'. (*Dialogue*: c. 21). It is Saint Catherine of Siena, too, who writes of the Sacred Heart as the source of our reconciliation and union with God; and her figure of the 'Bridge' helps to drive the truth home that there is for us, come what may, a '*vera communicatio*', a '*vera communitio*'. '*Ego sum via, veritas et vita*'. 'I have loved thee with an everlasting love therefore I drew thee, having pity on thee'.

Our blessed Lord, true God and true man, altogether divine and altogether human, draws us to him by way of love, by way of friendship with his fellow-man. He redeems us and raises us up to love him, as he wishes to be loved, with the love that is called Agape, the love of Charity that fulfils our nature as men: in this as in all else '*gratia perficit naturam*'. This love of which we speak is infinitely firm and buoyant, for it bears forward with it every virtue of which man is capable. It is more than mere kindness of disposition, mere benevolence, far more than that attitude which we call humanitarian; for humanitarianism is but skin-deep, as we have experienced to our cost within the last few years. This love is as strong as death, for it brings with it the fruits of Christ's passion; and under its impulse a man is ready to undergo pain, suffering, violence and death. It is a love that far exceeds our own poor capacity, that gathers and knits firmly together all those qualities in a man that we associate with Christian sanctity and Christian martyrdom. In its exercise we are called to take up the Cross by way of daily self-denial, by the death of self—in the selfish sense—and by all that is conveyed in the word mortification—and, let us add, the word expiation, for expiation bears intimately upon our love and devotion for the Sacred Heart of our Lord.

Nonetheless, mortification must not be regarded in isolation, simply as an exercise in self-control, an apprenticeship in the mastering of our lower nature. We are not Stoics, whose practice of impassivity, whose crushing of the passions, risked turning the heart to stone and the will to an inordinate pride. We are Christians, whose mortification is part of our self-surrender in love. Our self-surrender, our submission, is not forced from us as slaves; it is given freely by us men in terms of love and friendship. In the order of divine grace and charity we are fully '*causi sui*', free men, who under divine grace give ourselves fully and freely in our friendship with Christ. 'This is the greatest love a man can show, that he should lay down his life for his friends; and you, if you do all that I command you, are my friends'. The words of that heart-to-heart talk in the Upper Room brim with understanding and tenderness; they spring from a heart

of flesh, ready to shed every drop of the precious blood for us his friends next day upon Calvary.

'Jesu, mitis et humilis corde, fac cor nostrum secundum Cor tuum'.

'Aufer cor lapideum de carne nostra, et da nobis cor carneum, quod te amet, te diligat, te delectetur, te sequatur, te perfruatur'.

Devotion to the Sacred Heart is indispensable for us whom he calls to be his priests. All our lives this priesthood is to be lived and exercised in our manhood: as priests we always remain men; and there must be no trace of inhumanity in Christ's priest. Through his priesthood the humanity in us is to be developed not dwarfed, fulfilled not frustrated, raised to its true level by our striving for union with Christ. 'It was not you that chose me, it was I that chose you. The task I have appointed you is to go out and bear fruit, fruit which will endure'.

May God by his grace give us clear minds and strong wills to persevere in priestly love with the deep and tender humanity of the Sacred Heart of his only-begotten Son, who has chosen us to be his friends. He has given us already more than we dared hope for, more than we dared ask for; and so for us, in the words of a poet who has pondered upon these things,

the rest is prayer, observance, discipline,
a lifetime's death in self-surrender.

Grant us, Lord Jesus, to be animated with the virtues of thy most Sacred Heart and to be enkindled with its love; so that being conformed to the image of thy goodness, we may be counted worthy to be made the sharers of thy redemption.