

SENTIMENT OR DEVOTION

A study of the Encyclical *Haurietis Aquas in Gaudio*

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AUGUST the 23rd of this year marks the centenary of the decree of the Sacred Congregation of Rites by which Pius IX instituted the feast of the Sacred Heart as a common feast for the whole Church. His successor Pius XII takes this opportunity to write his latest encyclical letter in order to explain and defend what has become such a popular devotion of the faithful during the past century. But it is a devotion which has had a much longer history than that, as the Pope is at pains to prove; indeed he here maintains that fundamentally it is an ancient and traditional devotion of the faithful, the only thing new about it being the new form it has taken on during the past three centuries owing to the influence of certain holy men and women. It is this new form which gives reason for the apologetic or defensive character of the encyclical.

In his classical work¹ on the nature and history of the devotion to the Sacred Heart, Jean Bainvel describes the repeated and unsuccessful efforts made by French ecclesiastics for a century and a half before the decree of 1856 to persuade the Holy See to institute a universal feast with special Mass and Office. Some may be surprised, if not shocked, to learn of the steady reluctance of Rome to accede to these requests. And in the light of her present attitude it does seem enigmatic at first sight. Some, we imagine, may even think it serves to confirm the opinion of those who, as the encyclical observes, profess to find an unhealthy element of naturalism and sentimentality, not to say superstition, in the more popular form of this devotion. This criticism is met and answered in the course of the letter where the Holy Father maintains that, rightly understood and used, it is theologically sound and spiritually profitable, as well as fundamentally ancient and traditional in the Church. Thus, after making reference to the visions of St Margaret Mary Alacoque about the end of the seventeenth century and to the part she played in the spread of the devotion under its new form, he proceeds to say:

'It ought not to be asserted that this devotion owes its origin

¹ *La devotion au Sacré Coeur de Jesus*. Paris 1906). See also his article in the Catholic Encyclopedia.

to a divine revelation made to a private person, or that it sprang up suddenly in the Church. On the contrary it should rather be said that it is a thing that flourishes spontaneously from the lively faith and fervent piety which chosen souls entertain towards their adorable Saviour and his glorious wounds, which bear such eloquent testimony to his immense love for us.'

And perhaps this was the mind of the Holy See in refusing the repeated requests mentioned above. It is true that St Margaret Mary received some sceptical treatment at the hands of her community who laughed at her as a visionary, and it was not until 1864 that she was raised to the altars of the Church by beatification. But unless we are to assume that Rome shared the doubts of her sisters in Religion we may very well conjecture that the refusal to institute a universal feast meant no more than that the devotion was sufficiently catered for in the feasts of our Lord already to be found in the calendar. Thus in 1697, a few years after the death of the saint, her sisters of the Visitation received the privilege of keeping a special feast of the Sacred Heart, but the Mass to be used was the old Mass of the Five Sacred Wounds which already commemorated the loving and suffering heart of Christ. As is well known, the devotion to the Five Wounds is of ancient origin and was widespread in pre-Reformation England.

But already thirty years before 1697 a special feast of the Sacred Heart was being celebrated in certain parts of France, if not with the permission of the Holy See at least with the approval of some of the bishops. No doubt this is traceable to the influence of St John Eudes (1601-1680) who was responsible for the liturgical office used at the feast. The spread of the devotion led to further pressure being brought to bear on the Holy See for its universal extension, and in 1765, the Queen of France adding her prayer to that of the ecclesiastics, Clement XIII was persuaded to grant the privilege of celebrating the feast throughout France. For the understanding of these events it is not without significance that this was the period of the great struggle with the Jansenists and those French encyclopedic philosophers whose rationalism was fast corrupting the upper classes in other countries as well as in France. They openly professed their determination to destroy the Church to which they contemptuously referred as *l'Infâme*. Only four years before, in 1761, Voltaire had written to one of his friends: 'When we have got rid of the Jesuits we shall have easy

work with *l'Infâme*'. And it was only eight years later, in 1773, that Clement XIV signed the brief by which the Holy See itself decreed the suppression of the Society of Jesus. No doubt this was a move which Rome considered to be in the best interests of the peace of the Church, but to many of the faithful it must have seemed that the forces of evil were triumphant. It was a time, therefore, when there was very good reason for propagating a devotion which laid special emphasis on the need for divine mercy and reparation for sin; and it was owing to persevering appeals, particularly from France, that the Holy See finally granted the decree of 1856. The whole course of this history furnishes an instructive example of the proverbially slow prudence of Rome, as well as of the persevering determination of the faithful.

The past century has witnessed remarkable developments in the progress of the devotion. Pius IX instituted the feast for universal observance under the simple rite of a common major double (*totum duplex* in the Dominican calendar). In the meantime there grew up and increased the practice of consecrating homes, communities and nations to the Sacred Heart, a custom which the Holy See silently observed without comment until 1899 when Leo XIII prescribed a general consecration of the whole world, at the same time raising the feast to the rank of a double of the first class. A quarter of a century later Pius XI, by his encyclical *Miserentissimus Redemptor* of 8 May 1928, put the final touches to the feast by adding a most solemn privileged octave, thus raising it to the highest festival rank. Some years later our Dominican liturgy lost its old and much regretted office of the Sacred Heart with the splendid hymns *Quicumque certum quaeritis* and *Summi Parentis Filio*, along with those very apt and beautiful extracts from St Bernard in the second and third nocturns. The encyclical *Haurietis aquas in gaudio* of Pius XII, issued 15 May 1956, marks the latest stage in the progress of the devotion.

With apostolic prudence the Holy Father, as though reminding us that true devotion consists in 'zeal according to knowledge', bids us halt to consider what is the real significance and value of the worship the Church pays to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. He turns his attention first to those Catholics who set little or no value on this devotion, some not considering that it is in any way necessary for true piety, others going so far as to find in it traces

of naturalism and superstition. He regrets to see that it meets with little esteem even among certain sections of the faithful who in other respects show themselves zealous in the cause of religion and sanctity. They maintain that this devotion, in its modern form at least, is little adapted to the urgent needs of our time; nay, that it is rather a hindrance than a help, suitable perhaps for such of the pious female sex as allow their lives to be ruled by emotion and sentiment, but unworthy of people of culture and intelligence. For what the world now needs above all, soaked as it is in atheistic materialism and gross secularism, the cult of the body and the neglect of the spirit, is a devotion that appeals to the reason rather than to the feelings. We may agree with them, and the Holy Father would be the first to do so, that most of what we encounter in the pagan state of the modern world consists in a gross appeal to the emotions, and not the highest emotions by any means. But what is to be said of the conclusions these critics draw from popular devotion to the Sacred Heart?

As is usual in papal documents of this kind, no names are named and no indication is given of the quarters in which these opinions have been ventilated. But doubtless many of us have heard or read things like this; some of us perhaps have said similar things (though not so immoderately, I hope) in attacking the prevalent sentimentality of our times in which emotion seems to be taking the place of reason in art and letters and ethics, as well as in the religious sphere. Observant readers of the modern press cannot fail to notice how regularly 'we feel' is used instead of 'we think'. The modern man *feels* that certain things are true, or right, or necessary. He *feels* certain of this or that, though certitude, if it is certitude, is an act of the intelligence firmly adhering to a thing as true, based not on the feelings but on objective evidence or else reliable authority. The feeling of certainty is no guarantee that you are right; as Father Vincent McNabb used to say to his students, you can be quite certain and quite wrong. As for the question of ethics and emotionalism, we all remember the famous mother-and-child controversy, the recurring debates about euthanasia and mercy-killing; and at the present time we have the long-drawn-out discussion about the rights and wrongs of capital punishment. The arguments used have furnished us with proofs of the modern flight from reason. And in the matter of religious controversy we have seen it set

down in black and white by an opponent who desired to be thought serious that the Catholic system cannot be right; it is too logical, and religion is not logic but life. What he really meant by this utterance was that religion is not a matter for the mind but for the feelings; what we feel to be right and true, that is the proper rule of faith; it is not *fides*, an act of the mind governed by the will that is required, but *fiducia*, a confidence proceeding from an unexplainable feeling inside.

This may be all very true but it does not touch the subject under discussion unless we think that Catholics are as materially minded as the rest of the world. We have to face the fact that we are all the children of our age, and it would be a lack of sincerity to persuade ourselves that we manage to live in the world without being of the world. It is no longer as it was in the last century and before, when Catholics were clearly marked off from the rest of the people of this country as a peculiar people. And in the religious sphere for better or worse there is certainly a well-marked change today from the sturdy and unemotional piety common among our forefathers. You have only to compare modern manuals of devotion with those formerly in common use (Challoner's meditations and prayers provide a good example) in order to appreciate the difference. It might be summed up by saying that we are more concerned with *devotions*, they with *devotion*, understanding the latter word in the sense defined by ascetic theologians like St Thomas and St Francis of Sales. For them it meant that primary and most important act of the virtue of *religion*, a virtue that resides in the will and not in the feelings: that act which essentially consists in the will's determination to stick at all costs to the things that belong to the service of God. And unless our ancestors had firmly persevered in that sort of devotion the Church would hardly exist in this country today. That national characteristic of a certain stoicism which forbade the public exhibition of emotion they extended to the sphere of religion; they professed to feel a repugnance for what they called the sentimental and showy piety of some of their continental brethren. This, they thought, was one reason for the religious indifference and anticlericalism of the men-folk in foreign lands where so many considered religion to be fit only for women and children.

Now we need hardly say that the Holy Father is certainly no

advocate of maudlin and sentimental piety in this encyclical on true devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. But at the same time there is a just mean to be observed in this question of the place of the emotions in religious observance. We are not stoics or, thank God, the cold and cultured intellectuals some of the critics seem to have in mind. Neither stoics nor cultured intellectuals are pure spirits; they have a body and a sensitive appetite both of which have their due part to play in the work of religion, for true religion means the dedication of the whole man to the service of God, soul and body with all their diverse powers under the direction of right reason and good will. One of the old arguments for the truth of the Christian religion was that it fulfilled all the legitimate aspirations of human nature. The Christian can say with the pagan Terence, *humanus sum et nihil humani a me alienum puto*, for we are not Manichees who think that everything proceeding from a material principle is necessarily evil. Nor are we to imitate the Puritans who, in their zeal for religion pure and undefiled, stripped our churches of all the beauty that appealed to the senses. Those movements of our sensitive appetite which we call the emotions (passions is the philosophical word) are not in themselves bad. They share in moral goodness when harnessed by right reason and good will; they are morally bad and harmful when so uncontrolled that they lead reason and will like captives chained to the chariots of their conqueror. And therefore that which makes a moderate appeal to our emotions is according to reason and can be very effective in stirring up the will to the exercise of devotion in its strict theological sense; whereas the immoderate playing on the feelings tends to produce a morbid state in which one lives in the emotions as do animals, for the emotions belong to the animal side of human nature.

We may suppose then that the objections raised to the popular devotion to the Sacred Heart are based on some such supposition as this. In dealing with these objections let us admit, what the Pope himself admits, that this devotion (if we are to judge from the use of words) is directed primarily to the physical organ called the heart which beat in the breast of Christ. I say 'judging from the words used' because I am persuaded that when people speak of praying to the Sacred Heart they are unconsciously using that figure of speech the grammarians call *synecdoche*, using the part for the whole. In other words they mean the person of Jesus Christ in

his incarnation, and it is doubtful if in their prayer they even advert to the physical heart of his sacred body. But all the same there is no objection, as the encyclical points out, against making the heart itself an object of our devotion and worship. The whole of Christ's human nature, of which his heart was a material part, was assumed by his divinity as an instrument for the accomplishment of our salvation. The heart played a part, and a very important part, in that work, and like every other member or element of his human nature was personally (which is the meaning of hypostatically) united to the divinity. Consequently the heart, like the hand or the foot of Christ, merits that kind of worship which is paid to God alone called *latria*. It was the heart of a person who is divine, so that what that heart experienced God himself experienced.

But, let us repeat, the heart of Christ was a material organ made of flesh and muscle like the heart of any man, or of any animal for that matter. In his breast it served the purpose for which that organ is intended; it was a muscular pump which by the opening and closing of its valves sent the blood coursing through his veins. About once every minute during his life, from his conception in the womb of our Lady to his death on the cross, his sacred blood circulated round his body in order to vitalize it and enable it to perform the work for which he had assumed it. A hundred million times during the thirty-odd years of his life that heart beat steadily without any apparent rest to accomplish this purpose which was of so great importance for us; a wonderful example of constant devotion and love.

But although we may without any sentimentality or abuse of language speak of every beat of the Sacred Heart as an act of love for us, we do not therefore intend it to be understood that the material heart was capable of eliciting or producing from itself that vital action which we call love, not even human love much less divine and uncreated love. The heart was not made for that, but for the purpose we have described above. In other words we do not love with our hearts but with those powers or faculties which are made to produce or elicit the act of loving. But before turning to the consideration of those powers of human nature let us hasten to add that every heart-beat of Christ, like every breath of his mouth and every step of his foot, can properly be called in the language of theology an act of love commanded by

the will, for every operation of his human nature was governed by his will for our salvation, and the motive of that will was his love for us.

What has just been said may seem to be at variance not only with the expressions we use in our prayer, even liturgical prayer, addressed to the Sacred Heart, but also with the common language of mankind which attributes love to the heart. Do we not say that we love with all our hearts, or that we can find no love in our hearts? We speak of some as heartless because they do not love, of others as heart-broken with disappointed love, and there are innumerable other expressions of a like nature.¹ But a little consideration will show that these are picturesque figures of speech, symbolical or metaphorical, and if they are so common, that arises from a simple fact of which every man is aware. The movements of the material heart are most intimately connected not only with our physical life but also with our psychological and moral life. The heart, more than any other member of the material part of our nature, experiences most quickly and keenly the effects of those movements of the sensitive appetite which we call emotions or passions; love and hatred, desire and repugnance, joy and sadness, courage and fear, hope and despair, and finally anger. This is what leads us to speak and write as we do, either using the heart as a symbol and sign of love, or speaking metaphorically of the heart as if it were the organ of loving; or, as we said above, taking the part for the whole and considering the heart as the whole person. The encyclical makes frequent reference to the symbolical aspect of the devotion to the Sacred Heart. The Holy Father quotes the words of his predecessor Leo XIII:

'In the Sacred Heart of Jesus there is a symbol and clear image of the infinite love of Jesus Christ, a love which moves us to love one another'.

He adds words of his own to the same effect:

'There is no reason forbidding us to pay worship to the most Sacred Heart of Jesus in so far as it shares in, and is the most

¹ This usage is not universal. The Semites, and the Bible bears witness to this, considered the heart of man to be the seat not of the affections but of the intelligence. 'Son, give me thy heart' means 'Listen to me, my son'. Out of the heart, says Our Lord, proceed evil thoughts. When St Paul tells his beloved Philippians that he has them in his heart he is assuring them of his continual remembrance of them. He tells the Corinthians that they are his epistle, 'written not on tablets of stone but on the fleshly tablets of (my) heart'. 'Man shall come to a deep heart' refers to meeting with snares laid by a crafty mind, as Psalm 63 makes abundantly clear. The 'clean of heart' are the pure-minded.

natural and most fitting symbol of, that unfathomable love of our divine Redeemer which he still shows towards mankind. For although his heart is no longer subject to the vicissitudes of this mortal life, it still continues to live and to beat inseparably united as it is to the person of the Word of God, in whom and through whom it is joined to the divine will.'

The words which follow provide an example of the metaphorical usage of the heart:

'On this account, since the heart of Christ overflows with a love that is both divine and human, since it is full of all the treasures of grace our Saviour has won for us by his life, passion, and death, that heart is the eternal source of the love which the Holy Ghost infuses into every member of Christ's Mystical Body.'

We must interpret his words in the same metaphorical sense when he describes the Sacred Heart as 'the most noble part of the human nature of Christ'; for if we use words in their precise meaning we have to say that the heart, being a material part of human nature, is inferior to Christ's human intelligence and will, in so far as these are faculties of the spiritual part of his human nature.

But the simple Catholic is not to be disturbed in his mind or distracted in his devotion by these apparent subtleties. His attitude towards the Sacred Heart of Jesus as the object of his love and worship is that summed up by the Holy Father in such words as these:

'The Heart of our Saviour is in some sort an image of the person of the Divine Word and of his twofold nature, human and divine. In that heart we are able to contemplate not only the symbol but the summing up of the mystery of our redemption. Therefore when we adore the most Sacred Heart of Jesus we adore in it and through it both the uncreated love of the Word of God and his human love also, along with all human feelings and virtues. For both the human and the divine love of Christ have moved our Saviour to offer himself as a sacrifice for our sake and for the Church which is his spouse.'

Following the teaching of the encyclical let us consider the sources from which our Lord elicited the different kinds of his love for mankind. The Holy Father assigns to this love a threefold character to which he concludes from the consideration of the reality of the Incarnation. The Word of God, he says, did not

assume an intangible and artificial human nature, as the heretical Docetists of the first century maintained. He really and truly united to his divine person an individual, complete and perfect human nature when he was conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary by the operation of the Holy Ghost. Therefore his human nature lacked nothing that is required for the integrity and completeness of human nature in general. As we say in the catechism, Jesus Christ was perfect God and perfect man, and perfect here means complete. Being truly God he therefore elicited from his divine will such an infinite act of love as was totally and immeasurably above all the powers of his human nature, for that human nature was a created nature and consequently could be the source of acts that were finite only. But he was truly man because the Son of God assumed into personal union with his Godhead all that goes to make up an integral human nature, spiritual soul and material body with all their different faculties and powers; intellect and will, internal senses like the imagination, external senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch, and finally a sensitive inclination or appetite with all its powers of passion or emotion. Such is the dogmatic teaching of the infallible Church, a doctrine of which examples are to be found throughout the Gospels. Needless to say Christ's human nature was not only integrally perfect but also morally perfect, because there reigned in it perfect harmony and order, every lower power being completely subordinate and obedient to the superior powers of intellect and will, and these in their turn were obedient instruments of his divinity.

From all this follows the important consequence that the Son of God during his mortal life was subject to the whole course of human experience, save only for disease and sin which, however, do not belong to the perfection of human nature. Thus he, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, was born and he died, he ate and drank, he shed tears, suffered pain and distress, he felt the movements of his sensitive appetite which we call the passions of joy and pity, fear and anger, and finally he experienced those feelings that are stirred up in the heart by strong affection. By figure of speech, as we have noted above, to these sentiments of the heart are given the name of love, though psychologically speaking they are the results of the passion of love which is elicited from the sensitive appetite, belonging to the lower and

irrational part of human nature. Much more noble and much more important, therefore, is that act of love which was elicited by the human will of Christ, a benevolent love which 'seeketh not its own' but is altogether concerned with the good of the object loved, a love that is totally spiritual in character because it flows from and resides in a faculty that is totally spiritual.

Thus we may speak of the threefold love of Christ, the love of his heart, the love of his human will, and the love of his divine will. Each is admirable and a fitting object of worship. But it is clear that devotion to the Sacred Heart should by no means find its ultimate object in the sentiments of the material heart of our Lord. Nor indeed should it stop at that which is much higher in nobility, namely the created and finite act of love which flows from his human will. We must never forget that the human nature of Christ in its entirety is but the created instrument of his divinity; that the purpose of the Incarnation is to show the immensity of the love of the divine will and to furnish a bridge by which man may attain to union with God. *Deus factus est homo ut homo fieret Deus*, says St Augustine. Thus it would be an error to concentrate too exclusively on the physical and material aspect of the Incarnation or even of the Passion of Christ, no matter how effective this may be in stirring up an emotional or sensible devotion. As Albert the Great warns us, 'through the bleeding wounds of the humanity we should enter into the secrets of the divinity'. If preachers of devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, therefore, refrain from concentration on emotional appeal and present the faithful with such a theological exposition as the encyclical contains, there will be little danger of the exaggerated sentimentality and superstition which some have feared. Nor, as the Holy Father warns, is the devotion to be used as a consoling and comfortable exercise, promising great rewards to those who are faithful. Let us be firmly persuaded, he says, that devotion to the most Sacred Heart of Jesus does not consist principally in sentimental piety. Nor should its chief purpose be to obtain certain promised benefits of which we learn not from the teaching of the faith but from private revelation. What, he continues, was really desired by our Lord in these revelations was that we carry out with greater fervour those principal obligations of religion which consist in acts of the will, love and expiation for sin, and thereby more readily gain true spiritual benefits.