

**LETTER OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
ON OCCASION OF THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF
THE ENCYCLICAL "HAURIETIS AQUAS"**

*To the Most Reverend Father Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J.
Superior General of the Society of Jesus*

Today, 50 years later, the Prophet Isaiah's words, which Pius XII placed at the beginning of the Encyclical with which he commemorated the first centenary of the extension of the Feast of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus to the entire Church, have lost none of their meaning: "With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation" (Is 12: 3).

By encouraging devotion to the Heart of Jesus, the Encyclical *Haurietis Aquas* exhorted believers to open themselves to the mystery of God and of his love and to allow themselves to be transformed by it. After 50 years, it is still a fitting task for Christians to continue to deepen their relationship with the Heart of Jesus, in such a way as to revive their faith in the saving love of God and to welcome him ever better into their lives.

The Redeemer's pierced side is the source to which the Encyclical *Haurietis Aquas* refers us: we must draw from this source to attain true knowledge of Jesus Christ and a deeper experience of his love.

Thus, we will be able to understand better what it means *to know* God's love in Jesus Christ, *to experience* him, keeping our gaze fixed on him to the point that we *live* entirely on the experience of his love, so that we can subsequently *witness* to it to others.

Indeed, to take up a saying of my venerable Predecessor John Paul II, *"In the Heart of Christ, man's heart learns to know the genuine and unique meaning of his life and of his destiny, to understand the value of an authentically Christian life, to keep himself from certain perversions of the human heart, and to unite the filial love for God and the love of neighbour"*.

Thus: *"The true reparation asked by the Heart of the Saviour will come when the civilization of the Heart of Christ can be built upon the ruins heaped up by hatred and violence"* (Letter to Fr Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, Superior General of the Society of Jesus for the Beatification of Bl. Claude de la Colombière, 5 October 1986; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 27 October 1986, p. 7).

In the Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, I cited the affirmation in the First Letter of St John: "We have come to know and to believe in the love God has for us", in order to emphasize that being Christian begins with the encounter with a Person (cf. n. 1).

Since God revealed himself most profoundly in the Incarnation of his Son in whom he made himself "visible", it is in our relationship with Christ that we can recognize who God really is (cf. *Haurietis Aquas*, nn. 29-41; *Deus Caritas Est*, nn. 12-15).

And again: since the deepest expression of God's love is found in the gift Christ made of his life for us on the Cross, the deepest expression of God's love, it is above all by looking at his suffering and his death that we can see God's infinite love for us more and more clearly: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (Jn 3: 16).

Moreover, not only does this mystery of God's love for us constitute the content of the worship of and devotion to the Heart of Jesus, but in the same way it is likewise the content of all true spirituality and Christian devotion. It is consequently important to stress that the basis of the devotion is as old as Christianity itself.

Indeed, it is only possible to be Christian by fixing our gaze on the Cross of our Redeemer, "on him whom they have pierced" (Jn 19: 37; cf. Zc 12: 10).

The Encyclical *Haurietis Aquas* rightly recalls that for countless souls the wound in Christ's side and the marks left by the nails have been "the chief sign and symbol of that love" that ever more incisively shaped their life from within (cf. n. 52).

Recognizing God's love in the Crucified One became an inner experience that prompted them to confess, together with Thomas: "My Lord and my God!" (Jn 20: 28), and enabled them to acquire a deeper faith by welcoming God's love unreservedly (cf. *Haurietis Aquas*, n. 49).

The deepest meaning of this devotion to God's love is revealed solely through a more attentive consideration of its contribution not only to the knowledge, but also and especially to the personal experience of this love in trusting dedication to its service (cf. *ibid.*, n. 62).

It is obvious that experience and knowledge cannot be separated: the one refers to the other. Moreover, it is essential to emphasize that true knowledge of God's love is only possible in the context of an attitude of humble prayer and generous availability.

Starting with this interior attitude, one sees that the gaze fixed upon his side, pierced by the spear, is transformed into silent adoration. Gazing at the Lord's pierced side, from which "blood and water" flowed (cf. Jn 19: 34), helps us to recognize the manifold gifts of grace that derive from it (cf. *Haurietis Aquas*, nn. 34-41) and opens us to all other forms of Christian worship embraced by the devotion to the Heart of Jesus.

Faith, understood as a fruit of the experience of God's love, is a grace, a gift of God. Yet human beings will only be able to experience faith as a grace to the extent that they accept it within themselves as a gift on which they seek to live. Devotion to the love of God, to which the Encyclical *Haurietis Aquas* invited the faithful (cf. n. 72), must help us never to forget that he willingly took this suffering upon himself "for us", "for me".

When we practise this devotion, not only do we recognize God's love with gratitude but we continue to open ourselves to this love so that our lives are ever more closely patterned upon it. God, who poured out his love "into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (cf. Rom 5: 5), invites us tirelessly to accept his love. The main aim of the invitation to give ourselves entirely to the saving love of Christ and to consecrate ourselves to it (cf. *Haurietis Aquas*, n. 4) is, consequently, to bring about our relationship with God.

This explains why the devotion, which is totally oriented to the love of God who sacrificed himself for us, has an irreplaceable importance for our faith and for our life in love.

Whoever inwardly accepts God is moulded by him. The experience of God's love should be lived by men and women as a "calling" to which they must respond. Fixing our gaze on the Lord, who "took our infirmities and bore our diseases" (Mt 8: 17), helps us to become more attentive to the suffering and need of others.

Adoring contemplation of the side pierced by the spear makes us sensitive to God's salvific will. It enables us to entrust ourselves to his saving and merciful love, and at the same time strengthens us in the desire to take part in his work of salvation, becoming his instruments.

The gifts received from the open side, from which "blood and water" flowed (cf. Jn 19: 34), ensure that our lives will also become for others a source from which "rivers of living water" flow (Jn 7: 38; cf. *Deus Caritas Est*, n. 7).

The experience of love, brought by the devotion to the pierced side of the Redeemer, protects us from the risk of withdrawing into ourselves and makes us readier to live for others. "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (I Jn 3: 16; cf. *Haurietis Aquas*, n. 38).

It was only the experience that God first gave us his love that has enabled us to respond to his commandment of love (cf. *Deus Caritas Est*, n. 17).

So it is that the cult of love, which becomes visible in the mystery of the Cross presented anew in every celebration of the Eucharist, lays the foundations of our capacity to love and to make a gift of ourselves (cf. *Haurietis Aquas*, n. 69), becoming instruments in Christ's hands: only in this way can we be credible proclaimers of his love.

However, this opening of ourselves to God's will must be renewed in every moment: "Love is never 'finished' and complete" (cf. *Deus Caritas Est*, n. 17).

Thus, looking at the "side pierced by the spear" from which shines forth God's boundless desire for our salvation cannot be considered a transitory form of worship or devotion: the adoration of God's love, whose historical and devotional expression is found in the symbol of the "pierced heart", remains indispensable for a living relationship with God (cf. *Haurietis Aquas*, n. 62).

As I express the wish that the 50th anniversary will give rise to an ever more fervent response to love of the Heart of Christ in numerous hearts, I impart a special Apostolic Blessing to you, Most Reverend Father, and to all the Religious of the Society of Jesus, who are still very active in promoting this fundamental devotion.

From the Vatican, 15 May 2006

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