MEDITATION ON THE HEART OF JESUS

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How can we understand the "devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus" today? Is it still a valid language for the XXIst century Christian? What part of it is form and what is substance? or, how can we go beyond certain images and formulations which go back to a theology of the past?

Let us look at the central dimensions we consider when we gaze on Jesus' Heart. If we sound the depths of Jesus' perception and love we meet at least four impulses:

1. A heart offered, surrendered, totally available to the Father.
2. A human heart which loves as no other heart has loved.
3. A human heart which asks to be loved.
4. A heart which feels the pain of the poor and wants reparation.

Let us develop these dimensions:

1. Possibly the most characteristic disposition of Jesus' Heart lies in his attitude of loving offering to the Father. He is totally available to accomplish the Father's will, his Heart is offered as an oblation of love for the salvation of all humanity. His fundamental attitude is one of generous surrender and gift of self, in love for his Father and brothers. There is no hint of meanness, egoism or self-centredness in him. He is the man for other people, in the service of the mission the Father entrusted him with. A heart which dies to its own desires, a kenotic (=annihilated), humble, obedient, both loving and valiant, heart.

When Paul invites the Philippians to be the same as Christ Jesus in their minds and writes the beautiful Christological hymn (2:5-11) he invites us to this kind of identification with Christ, proposing that we join Jesus in his sentiment of loving surrender.

We find the best expression of his gift of self and the utmost image of his surrendered Heart in the image of the Crucified One's open side, out of which flowed blood and water (Jn 19:34).

"The contemplation of the "side pierced by the lance" in which God's boundless will for salvation shines cannot therefore be considered a passing form of cult or devotion: the adoration of God's love, which has found its historical-devotional expression in the symbol of the "pierced heart", continues to be essential to a living relationship with God" (Benedict XVI, letter of May 15th 2006).

Jesus anticipated and expressed this surrender of his Heart in an unexpected way in the gestures and words of the Last Supper. "Take and eat, this is my body, surrendered for you" (...) "This is my blood, the blood of the new and eternal Covenant, poured out for you...". That night Jesus instituted, as a sign and sacrament, the impulse of his Heart's permanent love given for us. He accepted, out of love, the painful and unjust death imposed on him. He accepted to give his life for his people, thus proving the greatest of loves.

Jesus invites me to unite my heart to his, taking on as my own his desire and feelings. This is the fundamental inner attitude proposed by living the daily Offering of the Apostleship of Prayer and of the EYM. Surrendering my life for the mission, offering with my whole heart my day and my works in the service of the Kingdom. This is living eucharistic spirituality "for
Christ, with him and in him", Christ offered in the Eucharist and we with him.

2. Nobody ever loved as he loved.

Sinners, the poor, the sick, children, the marginalized, all found refuge and consolation in the love and goodness of Jesus who "went about doing good" (Ac 10:38). The downcast and despairing received welcome, understanding and strength from God's kindly gaze. The humble received dignity and new life from this Heart's abundant love.

"Since God’s love found its deepest expression in Christ’s surrender of his life on the cross, by contemplating his suffering and death we can fathom more and more clearly God's boundless love for us: "God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not be lost but may have eternal life" (Jn 3:16) (Benedict XVI, letter of May 15* 2006).

The greatest love, the love that gives its life for its people (Jn 15:13), the love which rises to meet us in this Heart, is:

- Free, unconditioned, boundless love (Mt 5:44).
- Measureless love, "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you" (Jn 15:9).
- The love of friendship, "I call you my friends" (Jn 15:11-17).
- Courageous love, it does not fear to make enemies of the powerful (Mk 3:1-6).
- Tender love, he embraced the children (Mk 10:13-16).
- Merciful love, "...Neither do I condemn you" (Jn 8:11).
- Love which is quick to forgive us (Lk 15:11-32).
- Patient and humble love (Mt 11:29).
- Challenging love, which invites us to follow him (Mk 10:21).
- Compassionate love for the crowds, "who were like sheep without a shepherd" (Mk 6:30-44).
- Love given to those whom nobody loved (Lk 7:36-50).

This is the ardent and unquenchable love which dwells in Jesus' Heart, the most human of all hearts, while at the same time it is a divine heart. Today the Risen One continues to love us with this same human heart, in his full glorified humanity. "And know that I am with you always; yes, to the end of time" (Mt 28:20).

We want to make this Heart our home. With his infinite mercy, he compensates for our limitations and incoherence. We take refuge in him, confident that we will not be rejected, because his love heals our miseries. And so let us understand and take as our own John Paul II's words to Father Kolvenbach at Paray-le-Monial: "Father, it is urgent that the world should know that Christianity is the religion of love".

3. The traditional devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus invites us to prayer of reparation in the face of the outrage suffered by a Heart which has so loved humanity and receives only contempt and indifference, a Heart which is sad because of the world's ingratitude.

*Here is a Heart which has loved human beings so greatly, to the point of consuming itself to testify to its love. And the only recognition it receives from most of them is ingratitude, through irreverence and sacrilege, through the coldness and contempt they have for me in this Sacrament of love. And what pains me most is that these hearts that have been consecrated to me also act in this way" (Jesus' words to Saint Margaret Mary in June 1675).
This plaintive and sentimental language may shock our modern sensitivity, but it throws light on a fuller understanding of Jesus’ true humanity and the awareness of what, to us, is a surprising dimension: Jesus, just like us, needs to be loved. He was a man just as we are human in all that this signifies: in his feelings, in his pain and joys, in his need for affection. The fact that he is also God in no way diminishes his true humanity. He likes to be loved, just as we do, and rejection distresses him. This is merely a corollary to the Incarnation. Let us remember Saint Francis of Assisi’ cry as he travelled through Umbria: "Love is not loved!".

The in comprehen sion of many, the violence of his enemies and his own people’s rejection of his offer of joy and salvation in the Kingdom of God, caused Christ profound suffering. He even wept over Jerusalem at the news of her rejection (Lk 13:34-35). A heart that experiences these sorrows is injured and wounded and needs the affection and friendship of true friends.

Jesus chose disciples for the mission of the Kingdom because he did not want to remain alone, because he liked to have friends (Mk 3:14 says: "he appointed [them]; they were to be his companions") and because his Heart needed them. He suffered human solitude and sadness when they did not trust him, abandoned him or failed to follow him. He hoped for faithfulness and support from them in difficult times. On the night of the Last Supper he asked them longingly to "remain in his love" (Jn 15:9).

The Resurrection did not annul the humanity of the Jesus who wished to be loved since, on the shores of lake Tiberias, the Risen One asked Peter to love him: "Simon, do you love me?" (Jn 21:15). Love asks to be loved, even in its present glorious state.

But another aspect should be noted when we gaze on this Heart that desires our love: Jesus not only asks to be loved and is saddened when he is forgotten, he also rejoices greatly in the love we can give him, out of our smallness and poverty. His Heart was certainly full of joy even before his Resurrection (Jn 15:11). Now too the joyful victor over death rejoices intensely over our generously offered hearts.

It would not be in keeping with the reality of Jesus’ Heart if we only remembered his sadness over the rejection of his love. His Heart is first of all a happy Heart! Happy with his sons and daughters, happy that we are with him, happy when he sees our honest struggles to be more faithful and better apostles. Happy with children’s smiles and a mother’s love. He is happy when the Good News is announced to the poor (often ourselves), and rejoices with us and likes to seek us. He encourages us in our pastoral efforts and takes pleasure in our achievements (which in fact are his).

4. The sadness Jesus’ Heart feels leads us to a fourth Christological theme. Gazing on it helps us understand his identification with the poor and makes the theme of reparation - a central theme of this spirituality - clear and actual.

Jesus’ merciful heart has a special predilection and compassion for those whom society forgets and despises, the little ones and the humble. Like a mother’s heart, God wishes to give more care to the most underprivileged.

Christ is sad today over the suffering of his brothers and sisters, the poor and suffering of this earth, with whom he identifies himself ("I was hungry and you never gave me food..." Mt 25). His extremely sensitive Heart loves them with special love. He suffers greatly at seeing so many of his little ones treated with cruel injustice, and the dream of a more human world for which he died still a task to fulfil.

And so, far from being self-centred sentimentalism, the true suffering of Jesus’ Heart is the pain of all the unloved people in history, of those who are sad because of solitude and
poverty, of the losers and the abandoned. Jesus continues to suffer in them and to ask for them love and justice, which he considers the most important reparation (Is 58: "The fasting which pleases me is that which empties unjust prisons").

We soothe and "repair" his afflicted Heart when we help our poor and defenseless brothers, when we take care of the needy, when we bring about justice.

"In this way - and this is the true reparation the Saviour's Heart requires - it will be possible to build the civilization of Christ's Heart on the ruins accumulated by hatred and violence" (Benedict XVI quoting John Paul II, letter of May 15th 2006).

The spirituality of the Heart of Jesus summons us to this kind of love, because this is how he loves us. Loving through surrendering our lives as he surrendered his. Loving with gratitude, without hoping for anything in exchange. Loving him because his human heart wants us to desire him. To love as he loved, to love those whom he loved.