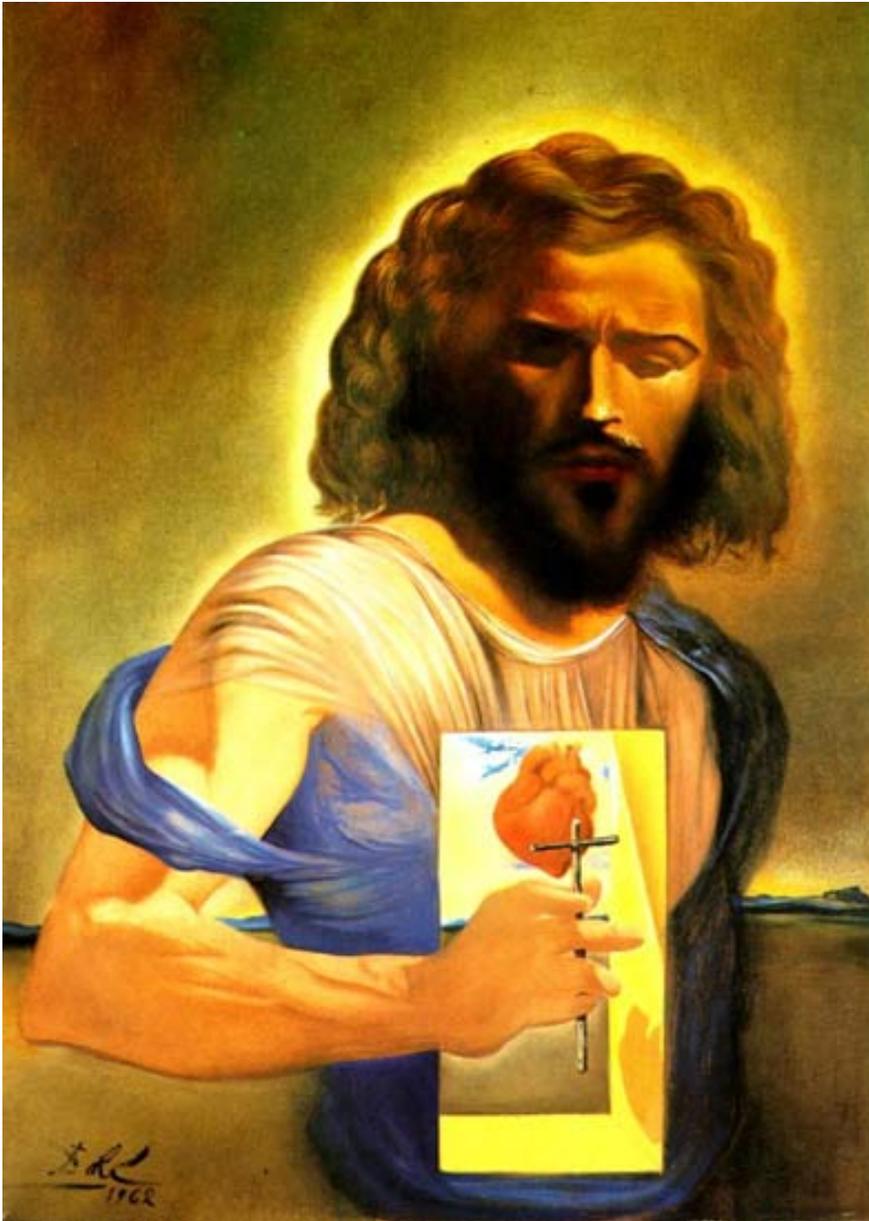


## Cultivating Presence to the Sacred Heart

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Psalm 22 contains that remarkable reference to the heart of Jesus becoming like wax, melting within His chest at the onset of His passion. He would spell out the reason for this in 1675 to St. Margaret Mary: “Behold this Heart which has loved men so much that it has spared nothing, to the point of exhausting and consuming itself to show them its love.”

That’s the deepest understanding of the Sacred Heart, whose feast we celebrate tomorrow.

In the darkest depths of the Inferno, by contrast, Dante depicts Satan as frozen nearly up to his chest in ice. Fove quod est frigidum – warm what is chilled within us – we therefore implore the Holy Spirit (as we did at Pentecost).

The “downcast” disciples on the way to Emmaus recalled that their hearts began to burn within them during their encounter with Jesus. He had initiated a certain exchange of hearts, animating theirs with His, even before they recognized Him in the fullness of this “heavenly exchange” – the breaking of the bread.

St. Francis de Sales, the co-founder of St. Margaret Mary’s Visitation order, refers in his Treatise on the Love of God to flames of heavenly fire which Jesus so “desired to kindle in our hearts that he never ceased to labor and sigh for this until death, even the death of the cross.” This so closely resembles what Jesus would soon thereafter reveal about His Sacred Heart, it hardly seems coincidental that Francis’s own heart remains incorrupt to this day.

Jesus also made it clear that the sublime love emanating from His Sacred Heart is largely met with ingratitude. St. Claude de la Colombiere – St. Margaret Mary’s confidant privileged with spreading devotion to the Sacred Heart – put it simply: “He loves and he is not loved at all in return.” How many mostly missed opportunities there are to imitate Him in this respect!

In Paray le Monial (the French village where Jesus revealed His Sacred Heart) last year, I learned about a specific devotion – aside from the famous First Friday devotion. It originated from another Visitation sister in the 1800s who felt the need (since enthusiasm about devotion to the Sacred Heart had dissipated) to develop a concrete response to Psalm 68: “I looked for comforters, but I found none.”

An association, known in English as “the Hour of Presence to the Heart of Jesus,” was therefore designed to ensure that not a moment goes by that someone, somewhere is not intentionally consoling the Heart of Jesus.

Its models are the three who stood guard at the foot of the Cross while the Heart of Jesus was pierced: the Virgin Mary, John, and Mary Magdalene. I can’t help but mention, parenthetically, that Edith Stein’s acceptance of “the death God has reserved for me” – which she described as joyful even as Auschwitz loomed – was motivated by her desire to offer herself as a victim of expiation to the Sacred

Heart of Jesus.

I wish detailed information about this international, ecclesiastically sanctioned association were available online in English (this only gives a taste). Essentially, members commit to an hour per day of their choosing – during which they do whatever they would normally be doing at that time. At the beginning of their hour, they simply go in spirit to “the love station” – the Tabernacle. There, “they offer to Jesus their actions, their sorrows, their thoughts, their affection and the desire they feel to console his Heart by their love.”

The only time Jesus explicitly invites us to learn from Him – rather than listen (or “Amen, I tell you”) – he refers to the qualities of His heart, and promises rest for all who labor and are burdened (Matthew 11:28).

Today we are burdened not by the fastidiousness of the law as expounded by the scribes and the Pharisees, but with everything from the sprawling codes of political correctness and our various, harmful “isms” to those perennial human struggles with fear and loneliness, with a sense of meaninglessness, hopelessness, and unworthiness, with our selfishness or even brokenness that may at times seem beyond repair.

Since nothing is more tortuous than the human heart (Jeremiah 17:9), our best recourse is to turn our hearts over to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, which, burning with love, can eviscerate all that all that confounds and disturbs us, and can supply whatever may be lacking in us, such as charity or generosity.

We might tend to turn our issues, anxieties and wounds over and over again in our minds; the pronounced human tendency to turn inwards on ourselves – “curvatus in se” as identified by St. Augustine – is only exacerbated by the hyper-individualism of our time. But this is unlikely to bring the peace and communion we crave.

Proverbs (3:5) advises us to rely not on our own intelligence, gift that it is, but to “trust in the Lord with all your heart”. Neither, St. Claude de la Colombiere felt, is it advisable to rely chiefly on our will, indispensable as that is to the Christian life. Above all, as he makes clear in a beautiful prayer, he prioritizes confidence in the love of God.

Whether or not our principal motivation for devotion to the Sacred Heart is reparation, the Sacred Heart of Jesus repairs us and, according to St. Therese of Lisieux, even restores our innocence. In her characteristically confident manner, she tells us how she preferred to relate to the Sacred Heart: “To be able to gaze on your glory, I know we have to pass through fire. So I, for my purgatory, choose your burning love, o heart of my God!”

If such great confidence in the Heart of Jesus seems foreign to us now, perhaps this simply means we all need the New Evangelization – to let the great goodness of the Good News really sink in.

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