

The Immaculate Heart of Mary, a devotion for our time

Some devotions are more appropriate than others for certain times in the history of the world. The main idea of devotion, of course, remains the same throughout all the ages – it is a special love for God and His saints. But the manner in which we express that love and the particular focus of our attention changes from generation to generation. We might say that the special love is the essential part of devotion, while the manner in which it is expressed is accidental.

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Feeling strangely about the Sacred Heart

Non-Catholics looking at our devotions, without understanding them, often have trouble with this distinction. They see a picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus bleeding, surrounded by thorns and burning with fire, and they are repelled; it is strangely outside of their usual thoughts about Christ. Many modern Catholics also feel strangely about the Sacred Heart; it is an old devotion they have abandoned. A traditional Catholic seeing the same picture is moved to make an act of love for Christ. This difference in reaction is largely a matter of training. We have been accustomed to this devotion to the Sacred Heart, which has been very popular in the Church for hundreds of years. Protestants hardly know of it, and in addition many Protestants have an unjustified fear of statues and paintings in their Churches, a fear which is sadly imitated by modern Catholics.

The result of this strange repulsion is a general lack of love. Granted, the essential part of devotion could exist without much accidental expression, but that is not normal. If we love

in our hearts, we let it show in our words and our deeds. In a sort of circle, these words and deeds of love will increase the essential love in our heart and help to foster love in the hearts of our neighbours.

Now let us apply these ideas to explain the development of the devotion to Mary's Immaculate Heart. It is a common thing today to find a picture of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in a Catholic home, often beside a picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. This was not common in the past. Not one Church or Cathedral of Medieval Europe was dedicated to the Heart of Jesus or Mary, as a title of honour. The artistic portrayal of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, as an object of devotion exposed to our view, only began with the revelations made to St. Margaret Mary Alacoque in the 1600's. The artists' paintings of the Immaculate Heart began even later.

What does this mean? Is our devotion the same as that which existed in the Middle Ages and the Early Church? How did this modern devotion come about?

Let us start by examining the oldest record of Christianity, the gospels. St. Matthew, in his opening chapter, enumerates the ancestors of our Lord's earthly family and concludes with these words: "Jacob begot Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ." If in the entire Bible there were no further mention of Mary, this single reference would be enough to justify all the devotion to her over the past 2000 years. Mary is the Mother of Christ, the Mother of the Son of God become man. Surely she must be revered as such.

In St. Luke's gospel we find the famous words of the Angel Gabriel: "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with thee, blessed art thou among women." In the same first chapter we read the praises from St. Elizabeth: "Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb." In the second chapter we read that the Bethlehem shepherds "found Mary and Joseph and the Infant lying in the manger." Jesus sanctified everything He touched. The crowd desired to touch Him because virtue went forth from Him. Even today, when people go in pilgrimage to the Holy Land, they are shown the places where Christ was born, where He was transfigured, where He was crucified. And what happens? All who are followers of Christ kneel down and pray, because this is holy ground, sanctified by Jesus.

If these places are holy and deserving of respect, what shall we say about the Mother of Jesus? She bore Him in her womb, she nursed Him at her breast, she lived in constant contact with Him for 30 years. If the places known to Christ

were sanctified by His presence, how much more holy is His mother? The prophecy made by Simeon, speaking to our Lady during the presentation of the infant Jesus in the Temple, is an indirect reference to the devotion we are considering: "Behold this child is set for the fall and for the resurrection of many in Israel, and for a sign which shall be contradicted; and thy own soul a sword shall pierce, that out of many hearts thoughts may be revealed." This im-

age of a sword through the heart is often used to portray the Sorrowful Heart of Mary. Two direct references are found in the second chapter of St. Luke's gospel: "Mary kept all these words, pondering them in her heart." "And His mother kept all these words in her heart." These last verses easily turn our minds towards devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, but, as I have written, the manner of our devotion changes from age to age. Devotion to our Lady certainly existed in the earliest ages of the Church, but not in the same external manner that we have it now.

Earliest Painting

The earliest paintings of our Lady show her in the role of the Mother of God. In the catacomb of St. Priscilla, one of the most ancient in Rome, is found a painting of the Madonna and Child. Some icons of a similar theme are attributed to St. Luke. Beautiful words in praise of Mary have come down to us in second century writings of St. Justin Martyr, St. Irenaeus and Tertullian. In the year 431 AD, when the Christians gathered outside the Council of Ephesus heard that the council fathers had upheld Mary's dignity



as Mother of God, they were filled with joy and spontaneously organized a torchlight procession.

During the Middle Ages the most important developments of Marian devotion were an increase of prayers, monuments and praises. The "Hail Mary" prayer was completed by the composition of the second half – "Holy Mary...". The Angelus and the Rosary were preached as popular devotions. Every Saturday was customarily consecrated to our Lady. Thousands of churches and cathedrals were consecrated to Mary's name under many titles. The Litany of Loreto gives a partial list of the titles by which she was praised. The greatest danger occurred at the time of the Protestant Reformation. The poison of heresy spread and many of those who left the Church were inflamed by a destructive violence against devotion to Mary. Numberless pictures and statues were destroyed out of blind hate. It seemed that devotion to the Blessed Virgin was going to be diminished or obscured. Looking back on the past 500 years, we see that the opposite has happened. The principles of Marian devotion were reaffirmed by the Council of Trent, and the popular practice of this devotion, for the average Catholic, has at least as much importance as it did during the High Middle Ages, probably more. St. Bernadine of Sienna, a Franciscan missionary in Italy before the Protestant Reformation, and St. Francis de Sales, bishop of Geneva, Switzerland, after the Protestant Reformation, both preached specifically about devotion to the Heart of Mary. From this time, various devotions to Mary's Heart began to develop. However, it was not until the mid-1600's that the devotion became widespread, due especially to the efforts of St. John Eudes, a French priest who preached parish missions and founded the Eudist Congregation to continue his work. St. John Eudes was the first to write a book about devotion to the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. Through his influence, the feast of the Holy Heart of Mary was celebrated for the first time in 1648. Since then its popularity has continued to grow.

Heaven itself took an interest in promoting this devotion. The apparitions of the Sacred Heart of Jesus to St. Margaret Mary, beginning in 1673, spread the devotion to the Heart of Jesus in the universal Church. It was only normal that devotion to the Heart of Mary would spread at

the same time. Then, in June 1917, our Lady appeared at Fatima, Portugal, and granted a vision of her Sorrowful and Immaculate Heart to three children, Lucia, Francisco, and Jacinta. At Fatima our Lady spoke several times about the necessity of a devotion of reparation to her Heart. Most importantly, our Lady asked for the consecration of Russia to her Immaculate Heart and the Communion of Reparation on first Saturdays. Pope Pius XII, in 1944, influenced by this apparition, extended the Feast of the Immaculate Heart of Mary to the universal Church as a feast day for the octave of the Assumption – August 22.

Conclusion

We will consider the specific meaning of these devotions, considering devotion to the Hearts of Jesus and Mary together because their external manner of expression is nearly identical. We learned already that the essential of this or any devotion is love for God and His saints. The heart is a universal symbol of love; that is easy to see, but the other details of this devotion each have meaning. The fire burning above the two Hearts is a symbol of burning or ardent love, and the circle of thorns is a symbol of our sins, which pain the two Hearts by rejecting divine Love. We live in an age that has turned away from God, and we are called upon to make reparation. To St. Margaret Mary, our Lord spoke of His "Heart that loves so much and is so little loved in return." In the same way our Lady of Fatima appeared again in 1925 to the child Lucia, now a nun, and told her: "Look, my daughter, at my Heart, surrounded with thorns with which ungrateful men pierce me at every moment by their blasphemies and ingratitude. You at least try to console me..."

Here is what we must learn from the devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. It is not just a devotion of love for our Blessed Lady and her divine Son; it is a specific devotion of compassion and awareness of the suffering that our sins cause to Jesus and Mary. It is not just a pretty picture or a new title of honour which we bestow on Mary; it is a call to lead our entire lives in a way that pleases God. The sins of the world are greater now than they were in the past; this is truly a devotion for our time. The love of God and His saints is wounded. We must do what we can, with the love of our small hearts, to make reparation.