

DEVOTION TO THE SACRED HEART

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May 1972

Edited by Fr. Robin Koning, S.J. (July 2020)

Editor's Introduction:

Fr Daly wrote this paper in response to a request from Fr Peter Steele SJ on behalf of the Australian Jesuit Province's Spiritual Renewal team which had "been asked by the Provincial to suggest ways in which the feast of the Sacred Heart could be more adequately celebrated." Several Jesuits, including Tom, had been asked to "prepare a statement of their sense of the 'pastoral/spiritual/devotional' implications of the devotion, while others had been asked to prepare statements "on their sense of the theological meaning, as currently conceived, of the devotion." These reflections were to be "circulated to all houses of the Province, as an aid to reflection, discussion and prayer."¹

The paper below is Tom's reflection sent with a cover letter dated 10 May 1972 in which he writes:

Here is my contribution, almost up to time, for whatever it is worth. I hope it does not look too theological; its main lines fit in with thoughts I have had for some time and I had hoped to make it even more theological but found that I had grown rusty on some of the details. Other commitments made it quite impossible for me to do the reading I had in mind.

Thanks very much for the invitation.²

Footnotes in square brackets are editorial; others are in the original. Numbers in square brackets in the text mark the start of a new page in the original manuscript and refer to the number of that new page.

¹ [Letter of Peter Steele SJ to Tom Daly SJ, 10th April 1972.]

² [Letter of Tom Daly SJ to Peter Steele SJ, 10th May 1972.]

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What place can devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus have in our spirituality? Primitive spirituality is a spontaneous flowering of religion. But besides this there is the spirituality that can be looked on as applied theology; it differs from moral theology in being a creative and developmental application, while moral theology is the defensive application like pathology and medical and surgical therapy. Its capacity for genuine creativity and stimulation to growth will depend on the vigour of the underlying theology.

Spirituality can do without theology, and yet be helped by theology, to about the same degree as agriculture can do without science and yet be helped by science, or as transport can remain independent of or be developed by technology. But at either level it can take the form of devotions.

Devotion when spoken of without the article, is a steady attachment to a person or choice or belief. The meaning is changed somewhat when we speak of "a devotion". A devotion is some means of focusing such an attachment, some symbol that recalls it easily to mind and that retains something of its riches.

We can have a devotion to Our Lady, or to the Precious Blood, or the Eucharist or the Stations of the Cross or the Morning Offering. In the secular sphere you can have a devotion to Churchill or to proportional representation or strikes or the theatre. Such a devotion can grow out of an intelligent and articulate choice or out of a totally unanalyzed set of values.

A devotion differs, then, from a dogmatic definition. Its function is not so much to throw light on our religious beliefs as to focus what light we already have. The amount and quality of light available for this focusing will depend on our familiarity with doctrine and on the depth of our grasp of it. Our devotions will thus be affected by the strengths and the weaknesses of our theology.

The power of a devotion will be measured by its power as a symbol. How far is it able to sum up and enliven important aspects of our religion (whether or not they have been expressed, and whether expressed allegorically or as the result of theological reflection)? [2] If effective, it achieves in a global, concrete, commonsense fashion what the theologian achieves when he tries to establish a hierarchy of truths.

A single proposition, known by faith to be true, can be marginal and weak when looked at in isolation, yet gain considerable power when considered in its orderly relations with other and more central truths in its hierarchy, to such an extent that it may make its reciprocal

contribution to an appreciation of those central truths as well. Once the links between various truths have been discovered, and arranged in a hierarchy, the core truths are seen to be embedded more fully in the world by their relationship with truths that in themselves are marginal, while these marginal truths that are further from the centre of our focus gain value by their connection with the core truths and can also be commended to the assent of those brethren who have considered them unacceptable when they looked at them in isolation.

When considered in isolation from much of the Christian doctrinal context the heart of Jesus is a part of his material body, a part that is closely connected with life and death, that signals emotional changes and is frequently used to symbolize emotional life. It is one element in, or aspect of, a single unity incorporating limbs and brain and eyes and mind. All these human powers belong to the person of Jesus — a divine person, who, through them is able to act and feel and think and be aware in a human way. They are the limbs and mind and heart of God, and so are rightly honoured as the sacred limbs or sacred mind or sacred heart,

Were we to shake hands with Jesus we would be shaking hands with God; when we think of the blood of Jesus we recall and respect and come into personal contact with him, and thus we meet the Word of God who is this person and lives and acts through this blood and suffers the pain associated with its shedding.

His blood should make us think of him, and especially of his suffering. His words should make us think of him, and especially of his thoughts and hopes and choices. His heart should make us think of him, and especially of his love and friendship and joy and sadness.

A thought about the sacred heart of Jesus should go beyond this basic fact, and is well attuned to do so. It can lead us on to thoughts of (or acts, choices, attitudes, hope, trust, love based on) the [3] divinity of Christ, the incarnation of the Word, his satisfaction for our sins. It can lead outwards too, to our sacramental life, our life of grace, our call to glory, our immersion in the presence of Christ. Without loosening its central links with the core of Christianity, the sacred heart of Jesus can give meaning and relevance to the usual practices associated with this devotion, such as the morning offering, frequent communion, frequent confession, the making of reparation for sin.

Since the heart of Jesus is divine we cannot escape or forget the immanence of God, his love for us, his readiness to come to us and be with us as persons, the great mystery that God is not a snob. The heart is a reminder of the fullness of the humanity of God-made-man; today, as ever, it protects the faithful and the devout against the temptation to think of Christ's life³ as make-belief by God. Through this human heart Jesus has experienced real hunger and thirst and tiredness, real anxiety and fear and frustration and great indignation; loneliness, too,

³ [The original typescript has 'live' which seems clearly to be a typing error.]

as well as fellowship and joy and humour and lightheartedness. Since Jesus is God it is God who has participated in all these experiences of ours; not artificially, not as an outsider looking on, but through his own genuinely human awareness. The divine reception of these experiences diminishes their humanity no more than falling in love destroys one's appreciation of a summer's day, or learning a new language impedes the beating of a heart. The sacred heart is very much God-with-us.

Sin weakens our human nature, repudiating some of its capacities, and at the same time cuts off personal communication with God. Christ, in his sacred heart, integrates all his human powers so that he is also able, through that human nature, to make contact with his Father. Thus we see in his heart a perfect hatred of sin, a deliberate firmness of decision, a resolution to avoid all evil choice, that reverse the debilitating grip that sin has had on mankind.

Grace, on the other hand, builds on nature. There is nothing to prevent a graced man running as fast as a sinner, just as no man need lose contact with a friend through his eyes even though engaging him in discussion as well. Christ's heart is not purely human, even though it is fully human. It is a graced heart like the heart of a genuine Christian, and is thus one of the means by which Christ meets his heavenly Father. The higher [4] human mystics, similarly, did not lose their need for sight and hearing, for thought and choice of words, for human learning; Christ in his possession of the fullness of humanity, symbolized in the sacredness of his heart, was able to possess the powers of the mystics without prejudice to his ability to hear, to learn, to think, to discover in a human way.

The humanness of Jesus, held before us by the fact of his having a heart, not only encourages the deep and sincere involvement of the Church in material development and modern culture that is taught by Vatican II, but shows us that we are closer to God when we use all our powers in a humanly ordered way: our muscles and brains, our compassion, understanding, affirmations, denials, and choices. We are close to Christ in exercising human morality, as well as in docility to scripture, fidelity to the sacraments, desire for depth in prayer, and respect for doctrine — including its human vehicles, our poor but generous words.

This esteem — inseparable from devotion to the sacred heart of Jesus, whether in its naive or its more theological forms — for the material things of this creation obviously demands an emphasis on the sacraments, dispensing friendship with God through material and human means. Under the banner of the sacred heart was fought the battle for frequent communion, and prayer before the Blessed Sacrament exposed was made available to the people. Frequent confession, too, has been encouraged since it is an encounter with Christ in a way that is very human, even if not always close to the humanities. Is it not relevant today to ask whether our particular concept of community and our stress on the communal aspect of

confession have not led us to deny, at least in practice, the first alternative in the promise, "where two or three meet in my name I shall be there with them"?

It would be an interesting exercise to examine whether some modern theories of the sacraments have not managed (insofar as they have avoided the mere belittlement of, or bewilderment by, the material aspects of the sacraments — such as the use of bread and of words) to formulate powerfully some traditions that were not at all explicit in earlier theology but had been preserved in manuals of devotion.

Is there any special value today in devotion to the sacred heart that would compare with the influence it has had in the past in overcoming any tendency to over—stress the divinity of Christ at the expense of his [5] humanity, in encouraging a strong sacramental life, and in warding off the cold hand of Jansenism?

There are signs of a gnosticism in the Church today that as a matter of fact is not so alien to Jansenism, despite a different attitude to moral standards. Is it so ridiculous as might appear at first sight to surmise that the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World is not so much a proclamation of new insights as a manifesto summing up traditional values in the face of a likely attack?

When we hear that Christ rose spiritually we might feel that what happened to his body is something that hardly matters. When we concentrate on Christ's spiritual presence in the Eucharist is it because we feel in some vague sort of way that a bodily presence would be too crude? If there is any semblance of truth in this, then a recall to the sacred heart would be a healthy move.

In a more positive vein, it is my view that theology has a wonderful opportunity to develop a vigorous life today if it can grow out of its old philosophical framework that kept it too like a skeleton and out of the merely negative rejection of that framework, a rejection that leaves its growth like that of a cancer, till theology has the positive freedom of a philosophy that can go beyond logic to the sort of activities that give rise to logic, that can discern in conscious activities the basis for a coherent metaphysics, and that can deal with concrete historical processes as well as abstract relationships.

This removes the barriers to a theology of Christ that accords well with a vigorous devotion to the human heart of God—made--man. We find a Jesus who teaches with authority yet asks genuine questions and makes genuine prayers, who is immersed in his cultural environment and receives a human education while aware of his divinity, who deliberated, learns, suffers, speaks aramaic, without ceasing to be with and in the Father, and at the same time to be himself God.

What of the relation of this devotion to the specific current needs of the world? My justification for omitting this lies in my view that the main need when we examine devotion

to the sacred heart today is for an⁴ understanding of what that devotion is and how it fits in with Christian doctrine as a whole. At the same time, one of the key pastoral needs of our day is the development of a theology that is open, intelligent and faithful.

⁴ [The original typescript has 'and' which seems clearly to be a typing error.]