

This is the Heart that has loved so greatly

Late last year we started looking at Pope Francis' Encyclical on the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, *Dilexit Nos*, [DN] subtitled 'On the Human and Divine Love of the Heart of Jesus Christ'; and we reflected on its first chapter, 'The Importance of the Heart'.

Chapter Two, 'Actions and words of love' is a reflection on the love of Christ as found in the Gospels. 'The heart of Christ,' the Holy Father writes, 'as the symbol of the deepest and most personal source of his love for us, is the very core of the initial preaching of the Gospel. It stands at the origin of our faith, as the wellspring that refreshes and enlivens our Christian beliefs.' (DN 32)

Pope Francis highlights that 'Christ showed the depth of his love for us not by lengthy explanations but by concrete actions.' (DN 33) 'Jesus came to meet us, bridging all distances; he became as close to us as the simplest, everyday realities of our lives... "God with us".' (DN 34) He gives examples of Jesus reaching out and connecting to people, and points to Jesus' preference of healing people 'not from a distance but in close proximity'. (DN 36)

'To Peter, in his fright, "Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him", saying, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" (Mt 14:31).' The Holy Father then addresses the reader directly: 'Nor should you be afraid. Let him draw near and sit at your side. There may be many people we distrust, but not him. Do not hesitate because of your sins. Keep in mind that many sinners "came and sat with him" (Mt 9:10), yet Jesus was scandalised by none of them.' (DN 37)

Pope Francis emphasises the *gaze* of Jesus, such as to the rich young man, of whom we read, 'Jesus, looking at him, loved him.' (Mk 10:21) 'Can you imagine that moment,' the Pope asks us, 'that encounter between his eyes and those of Jesus? If Jesus calls you and summons you for a mission, he first looks at you, plumbs the depths of your heart and, knowing everything about you, fixes his gaze upon you.' (DN 39)

In his Heart, 'he invites us to find fresh strength and peace: "Come to me, all who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (Mt 11:28). In this sense, he could say to his disciples, "Abide in me" (Jn 15:4).' (DN 43)

The Holy Father turns finally to the greatest manifestation of Christ's love – his Passion and Death. 'The cross', the Pope affirms, 'is Jesus' most eloquent word of love. A word that is not shallow, sentimental or merely edifying. It is love, sheer love. That is why Saint Paul, struggling to find the right words to describe his relationship with Christ, could speak of "the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:20). This was Paul's deepest conviction: the knowledge that he was loved. Christ's self-offering on the cross became the driving force in Paul's life, yet it only made sense to him because he knew that something even greater lay behind it: the fact that "he loved me".' (DN 46)

Chapter Three is entitled 'This is the Heart that has loved so greatly'. Here the Pope recalls the Church's own tradition of 'reflection on the holy mystery of the Lord's Sacred Heart.' (DN 47) 'Devotion to the heart of Christ', he says, 'is not the veneration of a single organ apart from the Person of Jesus. What we contemplate and adore is the whole Jesus Christ, the Son of God

made man, represented by an image that accentuates his heart. That heart of flesh is seen as the privileged sign of the inmost being of the incarnate Son and his love, both divine and human.’ Quoting Pius XII, Pope Francis proclaims that ‘more than any other part of his body, the heart of Jesus is “the natural sign and symbol of his boundless love”. (Encyclical Letter *Haurietis Aquas* (1956) I)’ (DN 48)

Pope Francis looks more deeply at our adoration of the Sacred Heart. He writes: ‘It is essential to realise that our relationship to the Person of Jesus Christ is one of friendship and adoration, drawn by the love represented under the image of his heart. We venerate that image, yet our worship is directed solely to the living Christ, in his divinity and his plenary humanity, so that we may be embraced by his human and divine love.’ (DN 49)

We consider here the different types of religious honour. Above all, there is the supreme honour given only to the one true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit – worship and adoration, which theologians term *latria*; and because Jesus Christ *is* God the Word Incarnate, the Second Person of the Trinity made man, he receives from us this very adoration of *latria*. (cf. Second Council of Constantinople (553) (DS 431)) The Council of Trent defined (1551) (DS 1656) that the same adoration must be offered to Christ in the Most Holy Eucharist, since under the appearances, it is the God-man who is really present.

The veneration given to the Saints and Angels, which is termed *dulia*, and the special and unique veneration of *hyperdulia* given to our Blessed Mother, both differ essentially from this adoration that may be offered only to God. (cf. Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium* (1964) 66) Images of any of these persons, we may add, are venerated in a *relative* sense: the honour given to the image is directed to the person represented, not to the image in itself, considered as a mere thing. (cf. Second Council of Nicaea (787) (DS 600-603); Council of Trent (1563) (DS 1821-25); Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium* 51 (DS 4171); *Catechism* nn. 1159-62; 2129-32)

Two centuries ago, some were claiming that we should *not* adore the humanity of Christ or any part of it – as if this would be to give adoration to a mere created being, which would be the grave sin of idolatry. Pope Pius VI, refuting this, affirmed that we do rightly adore the humanity of Christ, including his Heart, ‘not indeed for its own sake and merely as flesh, but as united to the divinity.’ (Constitution *Auctorem Fidei* (1794) (Condemnation of the Errors of the Synod of Pistoia) 61: DS 2661) So Pope Francis, quoting Pius VI, affirms that we worship the Sacred Heart, *because* it is “the heart of the Person of the Word, to whom it is inseparably united”. (*Auctorem Fidei* 63: DS 2663)’ (DN 50) We worship the unified divine person of the Word.

‘With this heart’, Pope Francis proclaims, ‘the incarnate Son is alive, loves us and receives our love in return.’ Quoting Pope Leo XIII, he affirms that ‘any act of love or worship of his heart is thus “really and truly given to Christ himself”, (Encyclical Letter *Annum Sacrum* (1899)) since it spontaneously refers back to him and is “a symbol and a tender image of the infinite love of Jesus Christ”. (Ibid.)’ (DN 50)

‘For this reason,’ Pope Francis concludes, ‘it should never be imagined that this devotion may distract or separate us from Jesus and his love. In a natural and direct way, it points us to him and to him alone, who calls us to a precious friendship marked by dialogue, affection, trust and adoration. The Christ we see depicted with a pierced and burning heart is the same Christ who, for love of us, was born in Bethlehem, passed through Galilee healing the sick, embracing sinners and showing mercy. The same Christ who loved us to the very end, opening wide his arms on the cross, who then rose from the dead and now lives among us in glory.’ (DN 51)