

Divine love in a human heart

As we commence the month of June, dedicated especially to the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, we continue reflecting on Pope Francis' final encyclical, *Dilexit Nos*, [DN] 'He loved us' – On the Human and Divine Love of the Heart of Jesus Christ.

We rejoice in our new Holy Father, Pope Leo XIV, and anticipate his teachings that will continue to expound all the divine truths handed down in the Church – clarifying their meaning still further for us and developing our understanding of their implications. Obviously, a new pontificate is not a blank slate in which past teachings already laid down are reopened for question: the same Holy Spirit guides all the teachings. So in particular, the magisterial teachings of Pope Francis, having been proclaimed under the protection of the Holy Spirit in harmony with Tradition, now form part of this ongoing doctrinal heritage of the Church. As with his predecessors' teachings, God's People will continue to be instructed by them.

In Chapter Three of *Dilexit Nos*, entitled 'This is the Heart that has loved so greatly', Pope Francis explains that 'the image of Christ and his heart...was not devised at a desk or designed by an artist; it is...a real symbol which represents the centre, the source from which salvation flowed for all humanity.' (DN 52)

'The venerable image portraying Christ holding out his loving heart also shows him looking directly at us, inviting us to encounter, dialogue and trust; it shows his strong hands capable of supporting us and his lips that speak personally to each of us.' (DN 54)

Even if some particular images seem to us deficient in artistic value, the Pope writes that 'this is of little importance, since they are only invitations to prayer, and, to cite an Eastern proverb, we should not limit our gaze to the finger that points us to the moon. Whereas the Eucharist is a real presence to be worshipped, sacred images, albeit blessed, point beyond themselves, inviting us to lift up our hearts and to unite them to the heart of the living Christ.' (DN 57)

The images thus point us to the divine. But the image of the Sacred Heart blends this in a wonderful way with speaking to us 'of the flesh and of earthly realities. In this way, it points us to the God who wished to become one of us, a part of our history, and a companion on our earthly journey.' (DN 58)

'The eternal Son of God, in his utter transcendence, chose to love each of us with a human heart. His human emotions became the sacrament of that infinite and endless love...In gazing upon the Lord's heart, we contemplate a physical reality, his human flesh, which enables him to possess genuine human emotions and feelings, like ourselves, albeit fully transformed by his divine love. Our devotion must ascend to the infinite love of the Person of the Son of God, yet we need to keep in mind that his divine love is inseparable from his human love. The image of his heart of flesh helps us to do precisely this.' (DN 60)

Pope Francis recalls the teaching of Pope Pius XII in his 1956 Encyclical on the Sacred Heart, *Haurietis Aquas*, that the love of Christ's heart communicates to us a threefold love: 'First, we contemplate his infinite divine love. Then our thoughts turn to the spiritual dimension of his humanity, in which the heart is "the symbol of that most ardent love which, infused into his soul, enriches his human will". Finally, "it is a symbol also of his sensible love" [i.e. the emotional aspect of human love, linked with the senses].' (DN 65, quoting *Haurietis Aquas*)

Indeed, ‘the heart of Jesus Christ,’ Pius XII wrote, ‘hypostatically united to the divine Person of the Word, beyond doubt throbbled with love and every other tender affection.’ (*Haurietis Aquas*, quoted in *DN* 61)

‘The Fathers of the Church, opposing those who denied or downplayed the true humanity of Christ, insisted on the concrete and tangible reality of the Lord’s human affections...Saint John Damascene viewed the genuine affections shown by Christ in his humanity as proof that he assumed our nature in its entirety in order to redeem and transform it in its entirety: Christ, then, assumed all that is part of human nature, so that all might be sanctified.’ (*DN* 62)

This is a classic principle of theology: if there had been any essential aspect of human nature that Christ did not assume, that aspect would not have been redeemed. So if for no other reason, it is crucial not to exclude from Christ anything belonging to the essence of human nature.

‘These three loves’, Pope Francis cautions, ‘are not separate, parallel or disconnected, but together act and find expression in a constant and vital unity.’ Again he quotes Pius XII: “‘by faith, through which we believe that the human and divine nature were united in the Person of Christ, we can see the closest bonds between the tender love of the physical heart of Jesus and the twofold spiritual love, namely human and divine”’. (*Haurietis Aquas*)’ (*DN* 66)

‘It is the constant and unequivocal teaching of the Church,’ Pope Francis continues, ‘that our worship of Christ’s person is undivided, inseparably embracing both his divine and his human natures. From ancient times, the Church has taught that we are to “adore one and the same Christ, the Son of God and of man, consisting of and in two inseparable and undivided natures”’. (quoting Pope Vigilius, Constitution *Inter Innumeras Sollicitudines* (AD 553) DS 420) ...we venerate “by one act of worship God the Word made flesh, together with his own flesh”’. (quoting the Second Ecumenical Council of Constantinople (AD 553) DS 431)’ (*DN* 68)

‘It is precisely in his human love, and not apart from it, that we encounter his divine love: we discover “the infinite in the finite”.’ (*DN* 67, quoting Pope Benedict XVI, *Angelus*, 1/6/2008)

So our devotion to the Sacred Heart, as Pope Francis expounds, wonderfully flows from and manifests the Church’s faith in Christ as one undivided person in two complete natures, ‘the same truly God and truly man’. (Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon (AD 451) DS 301)

Encountering the overflowing human and divine love of the heart of this God-man, we love him supremely in return: ‘If any of God’s children were to know and taste divine love, the uncreated God, the incarnate God, the God who endured suffering, the God who is the supreme good, they would give themselves completely to him, they would withdraw not only from other creatures but even from their very selves, and with all their being would love this God of love, to the point of being completely transformed into the God-man, who is the supreme Beloved.’ (St Angela of Foligno, quoted by Pope St John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* (1996) 104)

And Pope Francis brings out the Trinitarian fullness: the Sacred Heart of Jesus leads us to the Father in the Holy Spirit. ‘When the Son became man, all the hopes and aspirations of his human heart were directed towards the Father.’ (*DN* 72) ‘When the Spirit unites us to the sentiments of Christ through grace, he makes us sharers in the Son’s relationship to the Father, whereby we receive “a spirit of adoption through which we cry out, ‘Abba! Father!’”’ (*Rom* 8:15).’ (*DN* 76) ‘Christ does not expect us simply to remain in him. His love is the revelation of the Father’s mercy, and his desire is that, impelled by the Spirit welling up from his heart, we should ascend to the Father “with him and in him”.’ (*DN* 77)