



THE SACRED HEART OF JESUS

MEDITATIONS AND PRAYERS

FR. BERNARD HÄRING, CSSR



Catholic. Pastoral. Trusted.

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Meditations and Prayers*
by Fr. Bernard Häring, CSsR

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INTRODUCTION

All of **humanity**—every man and woman and child—needs redemption. This is especially true of the innermost self, the heart, which is often wounded, hurt, misguided, disturbed, cold, and unyielding. Our first parents' fall from grace did not render their hearts—and ours—incapable of action. Evil thoughts, desires, plans, and deeds may arise from the heart, but, from its deepest depths comes a longing, a cry for redemption, liberty, and true love, that makes its presence felt.

It is in the heart that redemption begins to function and to change the person and the world. Redemption and the healing of people and their relationships come from God, from his loving designs and “thoughts of peace.” They become actual events whenever they touch the human heart with his love.

In the heart of Jesus, the Father's love meets us in incarnate reality and in the most tangible way. From that

heart arises the perfect response of human love to the Father. Jesus, who comes from the “bosom of the Father,” wants nothing less than to flood our hearts with his own overflowing love, thus making us participants in the love of the triune God, present and visible in his Sacred Heart.

The Church, through her devotion to the heart of Jesus, wants to waken us to this liberating truth to effect a most profound revolution: the conversion of the human heart, without which there is no effective redemption of the world.

Godlessness, in all its many forms is, above all, a perversion of the human heart. It indicates that we have lost our center; we have gone astray in our inmost being, in our hidden thoughts and desires.

“Heart” is a key concept of humanity. Scarcely any other word recurs so often in holy Scripture. The Bible speaks of the human heart in various ways: as the depth and center of our being, as conscience, as the inmost calling to love, as being created and recreated for redeemed love. But it also speaks of the heart of God, who reveals himself simply as Love—in loving deeds and words, in turning his countenance to us, and in drawing our hearts to himself.

Integrity of heart is the guarantee of healthy human relationships. The word “heart” is both a symbolic and a realistic expression for knowing lovingly. We express this in a very special way when we say “heart meets heart.” In everyday language, in popular songs, and in great literature,

attention centers on the heart when a person is deeply moved by the love shown by others or by the Other and, equally, if a great love meets rejection or is otherwise distressed.

In the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, as it has evolved throughout the centuries and as proposed by the teaching and liturgy of the Church, there is conscious concentration on both the symbolic and palpable reality of the heart, particularly in the personal encounter of our hearts with the heart of Jesus.

In this light, we come to see and to contemplate the whole of revelation as the dynamic, attractive communication of divine love in and through a human heart that is at the same time divine. And we also see that the noblest vocation of all men and women is to be called to love.

The devotion to the Sacred Heart of our Redeemer is a privileged pathway to true religion: “the cult of love” and “synthesis of the mystery of our religion,” as Pope Pius XII expressed it. Its purpose is the triumph also of God’s own love—through his grace in the hearts of the redeemed—over the assaults of hatred, enmity, hardness of heart, terrorism, and war. Above all, it is a matter of God’s merciful love transforming us in our inmost selves, enabling us to form loving relationships and to be “light for the world.”

True veneration of the Sacred Heart of Jesus is more than just a private devotion tending toward excessive sentimentality. In the heart of Jesus, Word Incarnate, the love and mercy of the triune God for the salvation of all

humanity are revealed. The divine purpose is nothing less than to bring humankind back to the love of God, from which it has gone astray.

The heart of Jesus tells us how great God's love for humankind is. The heart of Jesus also demonstrates how devastating it is for our innermost selves and for all the world if this love is refused. This redemptive love wants to touch and transform us to make us light for the world—a new people with healthy relationships.

Inseparable from the Sacred Heart devotion is a deeply felt pain for having offended the all-holy and all-loving God. We all know how much this dimension of repentance needs attention today. Those who are seized by the love of Jesus' heart grieve over the sins of humanity, and they long for reparation.

This devotion, which for centuries has been a great blessing, has diminished during the last decades, at least in some countries. The causes are manifold: disinterest in traditional devotions, lack of enthusiasm for spiritual realities, enslavement to consumerism, a seemingly constant barrage of sound and distraction, and minds numbed by social media. Frequently, too, there is ignorance or error about the theological foundations of the devotion itself.

Our points of reference here are holy Scripture, the liturgy, and the directions given by the successors of Peter, especially the encyclical *Haurietis Aquas*, written by Pius XII in 1956, which integrates the main lines of thought of

his predecessors. Also included is the rich harvest of tradition dating back to the time of the Fathers of the Church. Important as the influence of St. Margaret Mary Alacoque (1647–1690) has been for the devotion to the Sacred Heart, it would be a grave error to think that the devotion started with this seventeenth-century saint.

With great fervor, the ancient Fathers of the Church meditated and reflected on the wounded heart of Jesus. His heart, which opened for us, even after his death, the “port of salvation” became for us the “refuge of sinners” from which spring the Church and all her sacraments: the streams of grace. With holy envy, they recalled the beloved disciple, the evangelist of love, who at the Last Supper was nearest to the heart of Jesus. Within this context, they brought together the many texts of the Old and New Testaments, which tell of the heart-love of God and the image of God as the Father of Israel, the Divine Physician, the Good Shepherd, the Divine Spouse who, despite all the sins of humankind, remains faithful to his first love, his people.

Saint Anselm of Canterbury (1093–1109) did much to revitalize this great heritage in his time. Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) was an abiding influence by his deep devotion to the humanity of Jesus and his great love of the Crucified who yearned to draw us all to his heart and thus to the Father. He sees in the heart of Jesus, opened for us, the revelation of the deepest secrets of God, the “thoughts of his heart.”

1

GOD LOVED US FIRST

Everyone who loves is a child of God and knows God, but the unloving know nothing of God. For God is love, and his love was disclosed to us in this: that he sent his only Son into the world to bring us life. The love I speak of is not our love for God, but the love he showed to us in sending his Son as the remedy for the defilement of our sins. If God thus loved us, dear friends, we in turn are bound to love one another.

1 JOHN 4:8–11

Meditation on this First Letter of John should serve as the best introduction to the basic meaning of the veneration of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. The very first words of the letter indicate one of the primary concerns of this great witness to divine and human love. John shares with his readers the most intimate and encompassing experience of love and of the nearness of God in Christ Jesus. "It was there from the beginning; we have heard it; we have seen it with our own eyes; we looked upon it and felt it with our own hands; and it is of this we tell. Our theme is the word of life....What we have seen and heard we declare to you, so that you and we together may share in a common life, that life which we share with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:1-3).

In this text, the heart of John, who has felt the very beating of the loving heart of Jesus, speaks to us. He testifies that God's own love has made itself visible in the Word Incarnate. It is a tangible love that wants to touch us bodily and in that inmost self whose symbol is the heart. "This is how we may recognize the Spirit of God: every spirit which acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit which does not thus acknowledge Jesus is not from God" (1 John 4:2-3).

The heart of Jesus, whose pulsation was felt first by his Blessed Mother when she bore him in her womb and that lived and suffered for all of us. The heart whose anguished concern for us bathed Jesus' body in a bloody sweat and was

pierced by the soldier's lance even after he had died for us. This heart best symbolizes and incorporates the central truth of our faith in the Incarnation of the Son of God.

In this most sensitive human heart, the love of the Father and for the Father burned and spread its light and warmth. This heart loved the Father perfectly in the name of all creation. And it is in this heart that we see the love by which the Father has loved us.

With Johannine affection, St. John Henry Newman addresses Jesus: "My God, my Savior, I adore thy Sacred Heart, for that heart is the seat and source of all thy tenderest human affections for us sinners. It is the instrument and organ of thy love. It did beat for us. It yearned for us. It ached for us and for our salvation. It was on fire through zeal that the glory of God might be manifested in and by us. It is the channel through which has come to us all thine overflowing human affection, all thy divine charity towards us. All thine incomprehensible compassion for us, as God and Man, as our Creator and Redeemer and Judge, has come to us, and comes in one inseparable mingled stream, through that Sacred Heart. O most sacred Symbol and Sacrament of Love, divine and human, in its fullness thou didst save me by thy divine strength and thy human affection, and then at length by that wonderworking blood, wherewith thou didst overflow."

In the heart of Jesus, most loving and willing to suffer for love's sake, creation and the history of salvation find

their center and summit. As we gratefully contemplate this heart, we understand in a new way that God created the world and humankind for no less a purpose than to have sharers of his own blissful love.

In the heart of the Son of God, there is the unsurpassable reality of sharing in the Father's love and in the power of the Spirit of truth and love. Here, in this perfect spectrum and symbol, divine and human love are brought together. The Father's love flows to his Son and, in him and through him, to humankind; the purest human love, the authentic love of humankind, flows to the Father from the heart of the Son.

For God, who is love in triune fullness, there would be no motive for the creation of humankind other than his overflowing love and his total freedom to share his love and to call us to this sharing. He wants us, his people, to be not only recipients of his love but also concelebrants—joyous sharers of the very love with which the Father loves the Son and the Son responds to the Father in the mutuality of the Spirit. This pertains to the most profound meaning of God's creation of man and woman in his own image and likeness.

The more we respond to God's love and his call to return his love, and the more we come to understand what it means to love and be loved by Jesus and with Jesus, the more we become an image of God in reality and truth. Here on earth, we are students in the best sense when we learn, in and from the heart of Jesus, to adore the Father and to

share in his and Jesus' love for all people. Our final goal is the eternal feast of love with God in the communion of saints.

Sinful humanity imprisons itself in its own perverted self-love, in the loveless fortress of self-defense. All sins are marked by lovelessness, by a decreasing capacity to discern what true love is and a reluctance to strive for love at all. Utter lovelessness is godlessness, having no share in God who is Love. What some scientists predict about a final dissolution of the world through a kind of loss of energy is only a pale image of a world frozen in lovelessness.

Praise be to God that in his great love, he remains faithful to his design! Despite the sinfulness of humankind, he follows "his heart's desire" (Jeremiah 30:24). Only a heart of stone will not be moved by hearing God's word: "I will heal their apostasy; of my own bounty will I love them" (Hosea 14:4).

Faithful to the thoughts of his heart, God sent his beloved Son to redeem rebellious humanity and to fulfill this mission by the power of his merciful love. As believers, our response can be only amazement, praise, and boundless gratitude. Our wonder will never cease when we meditate on these words: "So the Word became flesh; he came to dwell among us, and we saw his glory, such glory as befits the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth.... No one has ever seen God; but God's own Son, he who is nearest to the Father's heart, he has made him known" (John 1:14-18).

The fact that he "who is nearest to the Father's heart"