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"Francis de Sales and the Heart of Jesus"

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*In his doctoral dissertation, The Theology of Hearts in the Writings of St. Francis de Sales, Father Abruzzese stresses the importance of the visual symbol in the development of prayer and spirituality. After looking at the understanding of heart in the sixteenth century, he turns to the writings of Francis, where he finds the saint regarding the heart as the center of the dual love of complacency and the love of benevolence. Francis attributes to God a divine Heart as the source of love, and finds the human/divine Heart of Jesus its perfect expression. This article is taken from Chapter Five, “The Heart of Jesus.”*

Salesian teaching in its originality serves to amplify the use of the heart, which until now Sacred Heart devotion has limited to Christ’s Heart. The Salesian teaching uses the heart as a means of describing and understanding the life of God himself. In the same way the heart image is also used as a focal point in the discussion of a person’s relationship to God and others. Both aspects meet in Salesian thought in the incarnate and pierced Heart of Christ.

**The Incarnate Heart of God**

The total submission of the virginal heart of Mary to the working of the Holy Spirit communicated by the divine Heart, caused the birth in time of the Son of God. St. Francis de Sales expressed the mystery in terms of the heart: “He who lived from all ages in the bosom of his eternal Father later was mortal in the bosom of his mother in time.”

Francis uses various expressions to describe the workings of the divine Heart and the human heart in the miraculous event of the Incarnation. He refers to the hypostatic union of the divine and human natures in Christ as a “nuptial kiss,” understood to symbolize the union of the divine and human hearts. This “consummation” or union of the divine Lover (God) and the Beloved (the humanity of Jesus) is accomplished in the bed of the body. The divine Heart of God in Christ’s own Heart is seen by Francis as “the fountain of living water, dew or rain come down from heaven”; “the fire from heaven with its stronger and more powerful qualities” of love; “the Tree of Desire”; or “the living Fountain of Jacob,” in reference to his fruitfulness. Equally so, God’s Heart as the source (womb) and sustainer (breasts) of life is understood by Francis to underlie the sending of Christ into the world. Jesus is sent
by the Father to bring life...that is to say, a life more perfect and more pleasing to God, a life which will render them (men and women) capable of uniting themselves more closely to divine goodness.

In this case, Francis understands the Heart of Jesus to have a dual role: it is the divine/human womb which gives spiritual birth and nourishment, and it is the human means of access to the Heart of God.

Perhaps the most beneficial approach to be used in presenting Francis’ teaching on the Heart of Christ, God and Man, is to use his own words on human perfection and apply them to an investigation of Christ’s Heart. He sees the perfection of love to be holy charity. He states that perfection is

the union of the soul with God and with neighbor for love of God. This is effected as regards God by the union of our will with his, and with our neighbor by a virtue immediately dependent on charity-namely, gentleness.

In the following section of The Treatise on the Love of God, its author explains how the perfect love of Christ for his Father found its expression in total submission to the will of the divine Heart of the Father.

It is written of you, O Savior of my soul, that you did the will of your Eternal Father. By the first human act of will of your soul at the first instant of your conception you lovingly embraced that law of the divine will and placed it within your heart, eternally to reign and have dominion there.

At the same time, the attitude of the human Heart of Jesus toward humanity is totally prompted by holy charity, desirous of perfect union with neighbor. The reflections of Francis on this point are the fruit of a meditation on the infant Christ.

His little heart, panting with love for us, ought indeed to inflame ours. But see how lovingly he has written your name in the bottom of this divine heart, which is throbbing there on the straw with the ardent passion which he has for your advancement….Loadstone draws iron, amber attracts straw and hay; whether we are iron in hardness or straw in feebleness, we ought to join ourselves to this sovereign little Babe, who is a true drawer of hearts.

**The Perfection of Virtue**

As the “abode of divine love,” the Heart of Jesus is the font and source of the acts of virtue produced by the will, making them, according to Francis, true virtues. Here he quotes St. Thomas Aquinas in giving the human Heart of Jesus at the very first moment of its conception “virtue to a heroic degree and even more than heroic degree.” By this he would understand Christ to have a purity of intention or “simplicity of heart” which seeks nothing but the pure love of God. The manifestation of the purity of intention in
the divine-human Heart of Christ can be seen in the actions of his earthly life, and particularly in his passion and death.

Seeing Christ’s Heart as a human heart moved by holy charity, Francis speaks of the “spirit” associated with Christ’s actions. The saint contrasts the spirit of Elias and of John the Baptist, who manifested a “spirit of severity,” to Christ’s own “spirit” which was one of gentleness and sweetness. Christ’s human “spirit,” for Francis, reveals his heart’s perfection both in submission to the Father’s will and in his meekness towards his neighbor. The passage links the face to the heart.

Our Lord himself wished to go up to Jerusalem. His disciples we read, tried to dissuade him from doing so…. But Our Lord, gentle and condescending though he was, still steadfastly set his face (for the Evangelist uses these very words) to go up to Jerusalem.

In another place Francis, playing on the association of “spirit” with “perfume carried by the air,” given to Christ’s “life and miracles” a sweet fragrance, because the heart breathes its spirit into actions through the love which prompts them. In this case also, the words of Christ are seen by Francis as being those of the eternal God speaking, because they are the result of the action of a heart united to God the Father through the Holy Spirit. Then, by an association of the Holy Spirit to the chrism of confirmation and the image of the heart as a vessel, Francis sums up the two virtues which shone forth in the life of the Savior and reveal the perfection of his Heart.

The holy chrism, which by apostolic tradition we use in the Church of God for confirmation and consecration is made up of olive oil mixed with balm. Among other things it represents to us two favorite and beloved virtues that shone forth in the sacred person of Our Lord. He has strongly recommended them to us as though to indicate by them that our hearts must be in a special way consecrated to serve him and dedicated to imitate him. “Learn from me,” he says, “for I am meek and humble of heart.” Humility perfects us with respect to God, and meekness with respect to neighbor. As I have remarked already, balm, which sinks deeper than any other liquid, symbolizes humility, while olive oil, which always rises to the top, symbolizes meekness and mildness, which rises above all things and stands out among all the virtues as the flower of charity….Take care that this mystical chrism compounded of meekness and humility is found within your heart.

In his sermons Francis continues to insist that the practice of the virtue of humility empties the heart to receive charity. Meekness towards one’s neighbor, founded on love, results in the practice of the virtue of mercy. Its very name connotes the heart - misericordia. It preserves the heart from reacting to any injury inflicted on it by others.

“Certainly,” say Francis, “the Heart of our dear Savior was full of mercy and kindness toward the human race, and he gave more than sufficient proof of this fact; as on other occasions when he exercised his clemency.”
Under the image of fire, Francis sees the fire of divine love which consumed the Heart of Christ as the means by which the human heart is inflamed with a divine love “for both the divine love “for both the divine Creator and his base creature.” For Francis, holy charity is the fire which gives the brightness to the Heart of Jesus as divine. Likewise the “sacred fire” of holy charity burning in the human Heart of Christ results in a zeal which Francis refers to as “ardent” or “burning” love. In a letter to St. Jane de Chantal, counseling her to “look upon God’s Heart which is so good and loving toward us,” he sees it in the crucified Christ under the imagery of the sun.

Oh my daughter, let us put ourselves before our crucified Sun in this way and then say to him “O lovely Sun of our hearts, the rays of your goodness pour life into everything….we will not stir until your warmth gives us life, Lord Jesus.”…May our heart and the Heart of our heart watch lovingly over you.

If the link between the face and the heart is kept in mind, then the resplendent brightness that shone on the face of Christ at the Transfiguration can easily be attributed to the brightness of his divine Heart, a light which “faded from his face while on the Cross.”

Under still another image, Francis likens the Savior’s external human actions to the garden of Paradise, no doubt referring to the heart as their source. Regarding the merits of redemption, Francis has the Lord take from his Heart, as from a “garden, a greater fruit of merit” than could have been offered in humanity’s original innocence.

**The Pierced Heart**

The ultimate and supreme expression of both the human and divine Heart of Christ is seen by Francis in Christ’s passion and death. If, as Francis insists, “love is the abridgement of all theology,” then it can be said that the crucified Christ, and in particular the pierced Heart of Christ, is the abridgement of all Salesian thought on the theology of hearts.

**Union of Wills-Human and Divine**

For Francis, the crucifixion of Christ manifests a more perfect obedience or union of wills than did Christ’s infancy. The saint claims that as “a child on his mother’s lap and wrapped with his swaddling bands, he could at least by his human will move his hands and feet; but on the Cross, he suffered his executioners to drive in the nails just as they pleased.” Then Francis takes Christ’s own words to support his claim that to lay down one’s life for one’s friends is the “masterpiece of charity.”

In describing the internal struggle of Christ in the Garden of Olives, Francis makes a distinction between the sensate affections of the soul and the operations of the superior faculties. The struggle subjected the Savior’s Heart to intense sorrow and desolation. But the struggle was confined to Christ’s lower faculties, because the Son’s Heart was totally united to the Father by an act of his will. This self-renunciation or surrender of the human will to the divine is reflected, according to Francis, in Jesus’ being stripped naked
for the Cross. In the Salesian understanding, desires are “clothing” for the heart. Jesus had no desires other than for his Father. His Heart was bare, clothed only with “charity as a garment.”

In human terms of the heart, the author speaks of the union of the human will to the divine will in Christ’s Heart as manifested in the crucifixion. A few pages before this passage he speaks of the “point of the spirit” united to the Heart of God.

Thus our divine Savior was afflicted with incomparable woes in civil life; he was condemned as guilty of treason against God and man; he was beaten, scourged, reviled, and tortured with most extreme ignominy. In his natural life, he died in the most cruel and piercing tortuents we can imagine. In his spiritual life, he suffered sadness, fear, terror, anguish, abandonment, and inner depression such as never had and never shall have an equal. For although the highest portion of his soul supremely rejoiced in eternal glory, love hindered this glory from extending its delights into his feelings, imagination, or lower reason, and this left his entire heart exposed to sorrow and anguish….Our Lord was lifted up on the Cross between earth and heaven and seemed to be held by his Father’s hand only by the highest point of his spirit.

The role of the human spirit arising from the human Heart of Christ and symbolizing the submission of his human will to the divine will of the Father through love is referred to in the following passage from The Treatise.

Love joins and unites us immediately to God, will to will, heart to heart, without any intervening comfort or further expectation. Alas, Theotimus, how afflicted is our poor heart when it is abandoned as it were by love, looks everywhere for it, and seems to find it nowhere….What is a soul in this state to do? Theotimus, it does not know how to conduct itself in such great anguish. It has no further power except to let its will die in the hands of God’s will in imitation of its own beloved Jesus….When our divine Savior is near death and sending forth his last breath, with a loud cry and many tears he says, “Alas, O my Father, into your hands I commend my Spirit.” This was last of all his words, Theotimus, and by it the beloved Son gave supreme testimony to his love for his Father. Therefore, when all things fail us, when our distress is at its height, this word this sentiment, this renouncement of our soul into the hands of our Savior cannot fail us.

Just as the human Heart of Christ was perfectly united to the divine will through charity, so the human Heart of Christ manifested the perfection of human love by means of the virtue of meekness, impenetrated by holy charity.

Bearing with the imperfections of our neighbor is one of the chief characteristics of this love our Lord showed upon the Cross. His heart was full of tenderness and love for us, for us, I say and even those who caused his death.

Francis also related Christ’s crucifixion to the Old Testament episode concerning Abraham and his son, Isaac, thus connoting the Heart of the Trinity. In fact, in one letter,
Francis openly calls the heavenly Father “Abraham.” In the following passage from The Treatise he speaks of the incident in terms of the heart.

One who binds his own son in order to immolate him has already sacrificed him in his heart. See then, I beseech you, what holocaust this holy man made in his own heart! Incomparable sacrifice….Do you not feel pity for his fatherly heart as he goes up the mountain alone with his son….O heart that angels wonder at, and that God magnifies! Ah, Lord Jesus, when shall it be that having sacrificed to you all that we have, we shall immolate to you all that we are? When shall we offer to you as a holocaust our own free will, the only child of our spirit? When shall we bind it and lay it upon the funeral pyre that is your cross, your thorns, and your lance…? O free will of my heart, how good a thing it will be for you to be bound and laid upon the cross of your divine Savior!

The Role of the Holy Spirit

The role of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of the Father and the Son is referred to under various images associated with the action of the heart and the Holy Spirit. The “spiration” or breathing action of the divine Heart is understood by Francis in the following text as an emptying and a filling up, an expiration and an inspiration.

Let us hear and follow the voice of the divine Savior who like the perfect Psalmist pours forth the last strains of an undying love from the tree of the cross: “Father, into thy hands I commend my Spirit.”

The author refers to this action of the Crucified as a canticle of praise arising from his Heart and directed to the Father as an eternal canticle, “the song of heaven.” The references to beauty, sweetness, grace, perfume, and balm, are all understood to apply to the Holy Spirit, and are further associated with the divine Hearts of Father and Son.

O what a canticle is this that the Son sings to the Father! How beautiful among all the children of men is this beloved! How sweet is his voice as it comes from lips on which the fullness of grace is poured! All others are perfumed, but he is perfume itself! The others are covered with balm, but he is balm poured out. The eternal Father receives praises from others as the fragrance of particular flowers, but as he senses the benedictions the Savior gives him, surely he cries out, “Behold the fragrance of the praises offered by my Son. They are like the fragrance of a field full of flowers that I have blessed!”

The sufferings of Christ on the cross, sanctified by the Holy Spirit are “an odor of sweetness to the Father” because of the union of wills. In a similar vein, the sufferings of Christ are seen by Francis to arise from the cross like “a fountain of good works, which springs up toward heaven” and at the same time like “the well of living water which runs with a strong stream.” In both cases the unmistakable image is the pierced Heart of the crucified Christ as a garden or tree comes from “The Mystical Explanation of the Canticle of Canticles.” Commenting on the line “Under the apple tree I raised you up (Canticle 8:5), he writes: “She [the soul] talks with her beloved of the great sign of love
he gives in the very place where he had been the most offended and when he resolved to
die for us after Adam and Eve disobeyed him.” In this passage Francis relates the “Tree
of the Garden of Eden” to the “Tree of the Cross.” However, judging from the
designation of the heart in other instances as “the tree of desire,” the “tree in the garden
of the soul,” “the garden,” and the further association of the heart to the apple-fruit, it
could be argued that rather than simply the cross, Francis might have the Heart of Christ
in mind by the designation.

Finally, Francis likens the death of Christ on the Cross to a holocaust, consumed by the
fire of holy love. He insists that Christ “died amid the flames of charity, a perfect
holocaust for the sins of the world.” The altar is not so much the cross as the Heart of
Christ in fulfilling his mission to “cast fire on the earth.”

He commands that the fire on his altar shall always burn and never be extinguished, to
show with what ardour he desires that the fire of his love should always be burning on the
altar of our hearts.

In a letter written to Jane de Chantal for the Feast of the Ascension, Francis speaks of the
sight of heaven with a veiled reference to the Heart of the crucified Christ as its “sun”
and “fountain.” “O my daughter, how lovely that heaven is, now that our Savior shines
as its sun, and his bosom is a fount of love, at which the blessed drink as they will.”

*Access to Divinity*

Even more than viewing the Heart of Christ as the center of the eternal life of heaven,
Francis sees the Heart of the crucified Christ as the source of that divine life and
friendship even now, and its means of nourishment here below. In this sense the Heart of
the crucified Christ takes on the maternal and paternal characteristics of the divine Heart
of God.

To Philothea of *The Introduction to a Devout Life*, Francis can say that the Heart of
Christ

 plans to bring you forth to salvation and make you his child. He prepared on the tree of
the cross whatever was necessary for you—a spiritual cradle, linen, swaddling clothes,
nurse and all else needed to make you happy.

In *The Treatise*, he speaks of the loving maternal Heart of Christ. Thus within Christ’s
maternal breast his divine heart foresaw, disposed, merited, and obtained all our benefits,
not only in general for all men but for each one in particular.” The Heart of the crucified
Christ offers nourishment to its spiritual progeny: “Thy breasts are better than wine,
smelling sweet of best ointments, milk, butter, and honey under the tongue.” One can
rest “in the arms of our Lord like a child on his mother’s breast.”

In contrast, Francis suggests that those in the Church are “children of the loving and
paternal Heart of Christ.” In his paternal role, Jesus’ Heart exercises providence.
“Henceforth have no other arms to carry you than his, no other bosom to rest on than his and his providence.”

Francis combines the two figures of speech, and viewing all as arising from the love of the Heart of Christ, he can maintain that “our Lord treats us as a good Father and a good Mother.”

Using still another analogy Francis describes the pierced Heart of Christ as God’s window on the world. “From the cleft in his Heart, he beholds all the hearts of the children of men.” The saint further describes God as the Lover of humankind, using an image from the Canticle 2:9.

Just as those who peer through lattice see clearly while they themselves are only half seen, so too the divine love within the heart always clearly sees our hearts…while we only half see him. If we could see him, we would die of love…Truly does our friend summon us there…”Come look upon my heart.”

If the Heart of the crucified Christ is the place from which God views the world, it equally serves, for Francis, as a place from which men and women can see God. “God’s love is seated within the Savior’s Heart as on a royal throne.” But even more than a mere vantage point for both, the Heart of Christ is the “Gate to the Father.” In this sense, Francis teaches that the Heart of Christ crucified is the meeting place of God and humanity and the means by which people rise to their divine vocation. Therefore, the pierced Heart of Christ is the mystical ladder of the greater Jacob both at its end in heaven, since it rests upon the loving bosom of the eternal Father, in which he receives and glorifies the elect, and at its end on earth, since it is planted in the bosom and pierced side of our Savior, who for this cause died upon Mt. Calvary.

The gifts of the Holy Spirit, representative of the presence of charity in the heart, are easily applied to Christ’s divine-human Heart and further heighten the analogy of the Heart as Jacob’s ladder. Francis refers to the gifts of the Holy Spirit as so many “sacred steps.”

Upon them angelic men will ascend from earth to heaven, to be united to the breast of God almighty, and upon them they will descend from heaven to earth to take their neighbor by the hand and to lead him to heaven.”

Continuing the analogy, Francis speaks of the pierced Heart of Christ as a “holy tabernacle,” a sanctuary for divinity, where the individual shares the divine friendship of God with those other children brought forth and nourished within his Sacred Heart.

Therefore, Francis can insist that “friendship is rooted on Calvary” for
Mount Calvary is the mount of lovers. All love that does not take its origin from the Savior’s passion is foolish and perilous. Unhappy is death without the Savior’s love; unhappy is love without the Savior’s death. Love and death are so mingled in the Savior’s passion that we cannot have the one in our hearts without the other.

Live, Jesus live, your death upon the tree

Shows all your boundless love for me!

Humanity’s participation in the divine friendship of God himself is described by Francis in the biblical terms of nuptials or “the union of the Spouse and his beloved.” The pierced Heart of Christ is the source, means, and fulfillment of this nuptial union

Yes, truly, Theotimus, God’s love is seated within the Savior’s heart as on a royal throne….Truly does this dear friend of our souls summon us there! “Arise, make haste,” he says, “leave yourself, take flight with me, my dove, my most beautiful one, into this heavenly abode where all things are in joy and breathe forth only praise and benediction. There all is in flower; all that is there pours forth sweetness and perfume….Come, look upon my heart in that cleft opening in my side, made when my body, like a house cast down in ruins, was so piteously broken on the tree of the cross! Come, and show me your face!...Let your voice sound in my ears for I wish to join it to mine. Thus shall your face be comely and your voice sweet.”

Oh, what delight will there be for our hearts when our voices, united and mingled with the Savior’s voice, have part in the infinitely sweet praises this beloved Son gives to his eternal Father.

The nuptial union in this life and the next is most powerfully rendered by Francis in his understanding of the kiss, symbolic of the union of hearts. In his description, the mouth carrying the Salesian association with the will seated in the heart- is the means of union of the Spouse and his beloved.

The kiss, is a vivid symbol of the union of hearts. Hence the spouse whose sole aim in all her acts is to be united to her beloved, says, “Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth.” It is as if she cried out, “All those sighs and ardent glances which my heart unceasingly throws out, will they never obtain what my heart desires? I run, but ah, shall I never gain the prize towards which I rush, to be united heart to heart, spirit to spirit, to my God, my spouse and my life? When will it be that I can pour my soul into his heart, that he will pour his heart into my soul, and that thus happily united we shall live without separation?”

Over and over, through a multitude of images and exhortations, Francis de Sales beckons to his readers and his listeners, urging them to live with generosity of heart as he did the love of the pierced Heart of Christ. Francis wishes all others to breathe out in union with the divine Heart his own maxim: **LIVE JESUS!**