

## *Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus*

The Devotion to the Sacred Heart can be traced right back to the New Testament, for example in the writings of St Paul and St John the Evangelist with their focus on Christ's love for humanity. This is most explicit in the scene of the Crucifixion in which the very last drops of Jesus' blood are shed as a sign of his so generous love.

It was around 11th and 12th centuries that the Devotion really began to develop, particularly in Benedictine and Cistercian monasteries. It is related that St Gertrude, a Benedictine nun, had a mystical experience on the feast of St John the Evangelist in which she rested her head near the wound in Christ's side and heard the beating of his heart. In her prayer she asked St John why he had not written of this in his Gospel and was told that this revelation was reserved for those times when love for God in the world, having grown cold, would need to be rekindled.

Between the 13th and 16th centuries this devotion was practised in a private way by many people, and also in a number of Religious Congregations. Various prayers and exercises were recommended, for example by St Francis de Sales (1567-1622) in his *Treatise on the Love of God*. It became popular in the Visitation Order which he founded with St Jane Frances de Chantal in 1610.

It was St John Eudes (1602-1680), a French missionary and founder of two Religious Orders, who elevated the status of the Devotion by composing an Office and establishing a Feast for the Sacred Heart in 1670 in the Diocese of Rennes in France. This soon spread to other dioceses and was adopted by various religious communities. Eventually it merged with that promoted by St Margaret Mary Alacoque (1647-1690).

Margaret Mary was a religious of the Visitation Order in the convent at Paray-le-Monial in Burgundy. Jesus appeared to her on a number of occasions with revelations about the love of His Sacred Heart for humankind. Like St Gertrude she was given the privilege in mystical prayer of resting her head upon Christ's Heart and being told how much he loved humanity and how he sought a return for this great love.

During other apparitions she saw Jesus' Sacred Heart on a throne of flames, surrounded by a crown of thorns signifying human sinfulness, with a cross above it. Jesus expressed the desire that his love should be honoured through the display of this image with the promise that all who did so would be especially blessed, in particular those who received Holy Communion with regularity. From this pledge arose the practice of receiving Communion on the first Friday of every month.

Successive Popes have been keen to encourage this Devotion. Pope Benedict XV canonised St Margaret Mary in 1920, and Pope Pius XI published an encyclical - *Miserentissimus Redemptor* - encouraging reparation to the Sacred Heart of Jesus in both prayer and action. In 1956 Pius XII published *Haurietis Aquas* - an encyclical expressly promoting devotion to the Sacred Heart.

St Pope John Paul II and also Pope Benedict XVI also referred approvingly to this Devotion.

Statues and/or pictures of the Sacred Heart of Jesus are now to be found in virtually every Catholic Church throughout the world. Generations of people have found consolation and hope in the prayer they have offered at such shrines to the Divine Compassion. When we see the familiar statue we are reminded that *Jesus heart is all-burning with fervent love for men* - as we sing in one of our devotional hymns..

This is a reminder we need to have because it is very easy for us to become depressed by our failures, weighed down by guilt for our sins, and doubtful sometimes that we are worthy of being loved by anyone. At times, for a number of reasons, we can feel very far from God.

Most recently, Pope Francis, a Jesuit, has also been keen to promote devotion to the Sacred Heart. On June 9th 2013 in his Angelus address at the Vatican he said:

*'The month of June is traditionally dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the highest human expression of divine love. Just this past Friday we celebrated the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the feast that sets the tone for the whole month. Popular piety highly prizes symbols, and the heart of Jesus is the ultimate symbol of God's mercy. It is not an imaginary symbol, it is a real symbol, which represents the centre, the source from which salvation for all humanity gushed forth... The Lord is always watching us with mercy. Let us never be afraid to approach him! He has a merciful heart! If we show our inner wounds, our sins, he always forgives us. He is pure mercy! Let us go to Him!'*

Margaret Mary Alacoque died at the comparatively young age of 43 having served as novice mistress and superior of her community. Her body lies to this day entirely incorrupt in the convent chapel at Paray-le-Monial in Burgundy – a phenomenon which in its own strange way is a sign of the lasting, sustaining love of God. She died while receiving the Sacrament of Anointing. Her last words, which we might ponder on at the time of this annual Feast, were: *I need nothing but God. I want only to lose myself in the heart of Jesus.*

We echo these sentiments in another of our devotional hymns ...

*O Sacred Heart, our home lies deep in thee;  
on earth thou art an exile's rest, in heaven the glory of the blest,  
O Sacred Heart.*

*O Sacred Heart, our trust is all in thee;  
for though earth's night be dark and drear thou breathest rest where thou art near,  
O Sacred Heart.* o0o