
1 / The Heart

Many people think the Sacred Heart of Jesus is an old-fashioned Catholic devotion that doesn't speak to anyone anymore. Some dismiss the devotion because of the way the Heart of Jesus is portrayed in art. A pierced and bleeding heart, for example, surrounded with thorns and presented apart from any physical body just doesn't appeal to some people. Other depictions of the Sacred Heart, trying to emphasize the tender love of Jesus with a wispy beard and doe-like eyes, make him look effeminate. In some popular images of fifty or a hundred years ago, you see flowers and cups and angels. Some artists, reacting against such sentimental portraits of Jesus, created images that are almost abstract, sometimes rendering the image obscure or devoid of meaning.

Increasingly, you can see Sacred Heart images that present Jesus in the style of an Eastern Orthodox icon, inviting the viewer to pray. Unfortunately, in these icons Jesus often appears stern and severe, like the all-powerful judge in the well-known icon Christ Pantocrator.

Stern images of Jesus take us in the opposite direction from the warm and inviting Jesus who said, “Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart” (Mt 11:28–29).

Art is a matter of personal taste, and our tastes change, both personally and in the wider culture. This is especially true of our tastes in religious art. As an adult, we may no longer like the image of the Sacred Heart that we liked as a child. Encountering an image we have never seen before, we may not like the face, the hair, the clothing, the background, or the way an image invites us to think of Jesus.

We have a right to dislike any images of the Sacred Heart we please. But let’s not throw the baby out with the bath water. Images of the Sacred Heart of Jesus are not the actual Heart of Christ—the divine and human heart that loves us as no one else can. As we get to know Jesus, we will find that to the eyes of our spirit his heart is unspeakably beautiful. Whatever our taste in images, we do not have to miss the deeper reality of the Sacred Heart. In this book, I focus on the meaning of the Heart of Jesus. My hope is that you will grow in devotion to the Heart of Christ, a devotion that is based on understanding. With a deeper understanding of the meaning of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, I am confident that sooner or later you will also discover images of the Sacred Heart that you find beautiful.

A Universal Symbol

The heart is a universal symbol. Right after the Christmas decorations leave the stores, we see red and pink hearts all over the place. The preparations for Valentine’s Day begin with cards filled with hearts and candy shaped liked hearts. No one asks, “Why? Why all the hearts?” On a day that’s designated for declaring one’s affection, romantic attraction, or love, giving a card or box of candy shaped like a heart says something we all understand.

And then there are the buttons, T-shirts, bumper stickers, and posters with “I ♥ my schnauzer” or “I ♥ the Big Apple.” We say we ♥ whatever it is we really like, whatever makes us feel good.

Popular music is filled with references to the heart. Bruce Springsteen declared, “Everybody’s got a hungry heart,” while Janis Joplin (and Faith Hill) sang, “Take another little piece of my heart.” Obviously they weren’t singing about the blood-pumping muscle in their bodies. When we hear these words, we know they’re talking about something more than a physical organ. U2 sang “Two hearts beat as one,” and we all understand this as the expression of the deep mutual love of lovers. The Backstreet Boys sang that “even in my heart, I see you’re not bein’ true to me. . . . Quit playin’ games with my heart.”

The lover’s heartfelt complaint is about someone playing games with his affections. It’s also significant that in his heart he “sees” or recognizes her unfaithfulness, for the heart is a most reliable way to know the truth.

Our language is filled with such expressions. Someone who has no compassion for others is said to be “cold-hearted” or “heartless” and is challenged by one in need to “have a heart.” Compassionate people are said to be “all heart” and if they are moved to the point of tears, they may be said to “wear their hearts on their sleeves.” A person with a “big heart” does not need surgery on an enlarged heart. It’s just a way that we say that someone has a lot of love for others. When we feel sorry for another we say, “My heart goes out to you.” It’s a way of saying that my deepest center, the place from which I love, sees and shares your pain.

The feelings of one’s heart, though sometimes sentimental, run deeper than the strongest emotions. The heart is not passive. The heart makes decisions. From the heart, acts of the will arise. So it’s no surprise that the virtue we call courage is found in the heart. In

*Be faithful in small things
because it is in them that
your strength lies. Nothing is
small for our good God, for he
is great and we are small.*

Blessed Teresa of Calcutta

fact, the word *courage* is derived from the Latin word for heart, *cor*. And so we exhort someone who is struggling to persevere in the face of difficulties, “Take heart!”

When people experience a conversion or make a major change in something they have previously decided, we say that they have had “a change of heart.” The phrase “change of heart” doesn’t mean they have had a heart transplant, but they have simply undergone a change in their inner self that has led to a change in their choices and behavior.

A person who is good and faithful is said to have a “heart of gold.” The symbol of the heart has lost none of its meaning and power despite the rush of modern times. The heart is a universal and perennial symbol. More than conveying a romantic feeling, it symbolizes courage and compassion. The heart is the symbol of true love, that love for which every human being is searching. Yet, we so often look for love in the wrong places. And our use of the heart symbol on our T-shirts and bumper stickers shows that we have a confused idea of love. We “love” whatever gives us pleasure. But is this true love? The fact that we keep searching indicates that it isn’t.

Hungry Hearts

Bruce Springsteen’s song “Hungry Heart” with its line, “Everybody’s got a hungry heart,” has to do with a man restlessly looking for romantic love, but it points to something more. Romantic love may fill one’s heart for a while and take away the hunger, but it is not enough. Nothing earthly satisfies. Made in the image and likeness of God who is Love itself, we are built for infinite love—a love that begins here on earth and finds fulfillment hereafter. Our loving union with God, which expands into a love for our neighbor, starts now. Our hearts are being transformed as we learn what Jesus taught. “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt 22:37–39).

In his autobiography, *The Confessions*, St. Augustine wrote famously that “you have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” We will always have a hungry heart this side of eternity. Even though we do experience the joy of union with God and love of neighbor, there will always be a hole in our hearts that only God can fill. We may turn to all kinds of substitutes, but they ultimately don’t satisfy.

In the First Letter of John, we read that “God is Love” (1 Jn 4:8). In God’s image and likeness, we’re made *by* love and we’re made *for* love. We’re made to know God’s love and to love in return. And if we truly love God, then we will love what God loves—our neighbors. The greatest commandment is one commandment—love, a love that is not sentimental or selfish—a love that is divine. Such love is possible only insofar as it originates in the heart of God who is Love.

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*We must enlarge our hearts in imitation of the Heart of Jesus. How much hard work this is! However, it is the only thing needed, and when this is done, everything is done. It is a matter of loving each person we meet as God loves him or her.*

**Chiara Lubich**

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God’s Kind of Love

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I believe that most people don’t understand God’s kind of love. For many, many people, the heart symbol declares that “whatever makes me feel good—my dog or my car or my kayak—I love! Whatever or whoever gives me pleasure, I love!” The real meaning is that it’s all about ME. There’s nothing wrong with enjoying and having strong affection for our dog or our sports team or the zoo, but it’s sad when we define our love of something or someone only by the pleasure we receive. We are in danger of falling in love only for ourselves, excluding God and others.

In his first encyclical, *God Is Love (Deus Caritas Est)*, Pope Benedict recognized that there is a problem with our understanding of the word

*love*. He wrote, “Today, the term *love* has become one of the most frequently used and misused of words, a word to which we attach quite different meanings” (*DCE*, 2). And then the pope went on to give us a definition for true love, pointing to the pierced side of Christ (Jn 19:37). “It is from there that our definition of love must begin” (*DCE*, 12). If we go to the pierced side of Jesus, we will find the way to true love. We will enter the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Devotion to Christ’s Heart is neither outdated nor unnecessary. God’s Heart is at the core, the heart of our Christian life. Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus is grounded in scripture and tradition. It is eucharistic and transforming.

Pope Pius XI’s 1928 encyclical, *On Reparation to the Sacred Heart* (*Miserentissimus Redemptor*), says this about the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus:

Is not a summary of all our religion and, moreover, a guide to a more perfect life contained in this one devotion? Indeed, it more easily leads our minds to know Christ the Lord intimately and more effectively turns our hearts to love Him more ardently and to imitate Him more perfectly. (*MR*, 3)

## A Prayer for You

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As you read this book, my prayer for you is St. Paul’s prayer for the Ephesians. The Letter to the Ephesians (like those to the Colossians, Philippians, and Philemon) is called a “captivity” epistle, for it was written while Paul was in prison in Rome. Paul knew the Church of Ephesus well, having spent two years there. It’s likely that news of his imprisonment caused the community members consternation. Would they too be thrown into prison? This is the context for Paul’s prayer. He makes it clear in the verse that precedes the prayer. “I ask you not to lose heart over my afflictions for you; this is your glory” (Eph 3:13). Then Paul writes this beautiful prayer.