

Interview / Card. Collins

“The Sacred Heart, a devotion that unites affection and reason”

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June is the month dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. A cult that has brought great fruits of holiness to the Church and whose spread is particularly due to St Margaret Mary Alacoque (1647-1690). Benedict XVI recalled that “in the heart of the Redeemer we

adore God's love for humanity, his will for universal salvation, his infinite mercy". This profoundly Eucharistic devotion is particularly dear to cardinal Thomas Christopher Collins who, when he was Archbishop of Toronto, wrote a beautiful pastoral letter on the Sacred Heart of Jesus entitled "The Heart Speaks to the Heart". The Canadian cardinal returned to emphasise the importance of such worship, especially in the present day, in this interview granted to the *Daily Compass*.

Cardinal Collins, what can the thorns around the Sacred Heart teach us in today's society where suffering frightens us?

True love involves sacrifices, and that generous sacrificial love often involves suffering. We read of the sacrificial love of Jesus in Philippians 2:6-11 where St. Paul says that the second person of the trinity did not cling to his equality with God, but emptied himself and came into our world, even to the point of accepting death on the cross. So there is a crown of thorns around the Sacred Heart of Jesus, as in his crucifixion, because the love he offers is not self-referential but generously sacrificial, as should be ours if we live in the imitation of Christ. We share in the suffering of others, and because we live in a world which turns away from God, now as in the life of Christ on earth, those who are faithful may well experience suffering. There are more martyrs now than in the first century. Our world often offers a superficial and illusory view of love that evades the possibility of a crown of thorns; but Christian love is more profound, and it means imitating Christ; he offered generous love in a world of hard-hearted people, and that led to a crown of thorns. We Christians must not seek to evade the risk of suffering that comes to those who offer the love of Christ in this sometimes cold hearted world.

A wounded heart to symbolize the only true love. Why is this not a contradiction?

The wound in the image of the Sacred Heart reminds us of the biblical foundation for this devotion, which is not merely a pious exercise, but like devotion to the Eucharist, and devotion to Mary, has solid doctrinal content rooted in both scripture and tradition. In John 19:34 we hear that a soldier pierced the side of Jesus with a spear, and blood and water flowed out. This wound to the physical heart of Jesus on the cross has been rightly seen as representing not only his sufferings, as the crown of thorns does, but also the sacramental grace that flows from the suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ. The great encyclical on the Sacred Heart of Pope Pius XII is called *Haurietis aquas*, from Isaiah 12:3 "You will draw water joyfully from the wells of salvation". The love of Christ is poured out upon us, and especially through the sacraments, most especially Baptism and the Eucharist, offers us a well of salvation on our desert journey through this secular desert, this territory hostile to our faith, in which we are on our way to the

promised land. Christian love is rooted in reality, not illusion, and that reality involves both the struggle with evil and the even greater reality of the experience of God's grace.

What does the flame that engulfs the Sacred Heart symbolize? What is the purpose of the fire?

The Sacred Heart is surrounded with fire. This represents the power of the love of Christ to transform us. In scripture we find the fire of sacrifice, in which the offerings are totally consumed. The disciple offers his or her life totally in love to God and neighbour. And disciples experience the totality of the love of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Fire can also be a sign of purification, and we remember that Jesus, the Sacred Heart, began his ministry with the call to repent, for the kingdom of God is near. We need to recognize honestly the reality of sin, and our responsibility for it, before we can repent and experience God's mercy, symbolized by the purifying fire. And fire is a sign of Pentecost. The disciples of Jesus are called to spread the faith, as fire spreads, something represented liturgically at the Easter Vigil, when the lonely light of Christ is carried into the darkened church, and as the disciples reach out to catch the fire, and then to share the fire, the whole church becomes bright with the light of Christ. And the fire also speaks to us of the divine majesty of Jesus - as at the burning bush, God appears among us through the sign of fire. The fire of the Sacred Heart reminds us of what our life of discipleship means. In the presence of the Sacred Heart, we must not be flickering flames.

Shall we refute those who believe that devotion is believing in something without reason? What place do the intellect and will have in the spirituality of devotion to the Sacred Heart?

All devotions, because they involve the emotional and affective dimension of our humanity, can be distorted and become sentimental and irrational. That is a distortion, and we see that especially in some sentimental artistic presentations of the Sacred Heart. But that is not what the devotion means. Devotions are vitally important, for the affective dimension of reality must not be ignored, any more than the intellect or the will. The heart is the symbol of that affective dimension. I very strongly recommend that people read *The Heart* by Dietrich von Hildebrand. Affect, intellect, and will must work together. Any one of them can be destructive if disconnected from the others. A purely intellectual faith disconnected from the heart is sterile, and disconnected from the will it is fruitless. An overly intellectual presentation of Catholic faith, too abstract, in which the affective dimension of both liturgy and popular piety is scorned is one major reason for people falling away from the practice of the faith. A faith based purely on the will, disconnected from the intellect and the heart, is tyrannical. A purely affective faith, disconnected from reason, can be destructively sentimental, as we see in "mercy

killing”, and in the glorification of feelings to create a parody of the true sacrificial love that is rooted in the truth that sets us free. Conscience can be reduced to “what I feel is right”, and that leads to moral incoherence. But Catholic devotion to the Eucharist, to Mary, and to the Sacred Heart is solidly based on reason, will, and affectivity. That is why in this disordered world in which intellect, will, and affectivity have become separated from one another, we need to emphasize these wholesome and harmonious devotions.

How can devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus be a remedy to cure selfishness?

We can become so selfishly isolated in islands of autonomy, worshipping the unholy trinity of me, myself, and I. This is made worse by our sterile addiction to computer screens, large and small, which take us away from real flesh and blood relationships, and drain us of affective experience. Time is sucked into our computer screens, as we waste hour upon hour in abstract reality and relationships. As the Beatles sang: all the lonely people, where do they all come from? But long ago Dante reminded us of the selfish autonomy that is hell. What we see in the sacrificial love of Jesus, which is most powerfully represented in the Sacred Heart, is the generous inter- personal love of the Blessed Trinity, made incarnate in the generous sacrificial love of Jesus. We are created not to collapse into selfish autonomy, but to live in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit through generous love, in the imitation of Christ, a love represented by the Sacred Heart.

Can you tell us a private episode about practicing this devotion in your spiritual life?

More and more in recent years I have tried to meditate upon the Sacred Heart, and the prayers associated with this profound and fruitful doctrinal devotion. This is especially true in time spent in adoration of Our Eucharistic Lord in the Blessed Sacrament, a form of worship that is intimately linked to devotion to the Sacred Heart.

What suggestions can you give to Italian readers to grow in devotion to the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus during the month of June?

I would suggest that everyone dedicated June to the Sacred Heart in a most personal way by meditating on the Gospel in the presence Blessed Sacrament, and by being sure that in all of our prayer there is a wholesome harmony of intellect and affectivity leading to action of the will, especially in the life of personal conversion. The Litany of the Sacred Heart is also most helpful. Read a chapter of the Gospel every day. saying at the end: what do these words say to my head, my heart, and my hands. I also suggest that people read *The Heart* by Dietrich von Hildebrand and *Haurietis Aquas* by Pope Pius XII.