



No. 20

A Quarterly Newsletter on Devotion to the Sacred Heart

June 2015

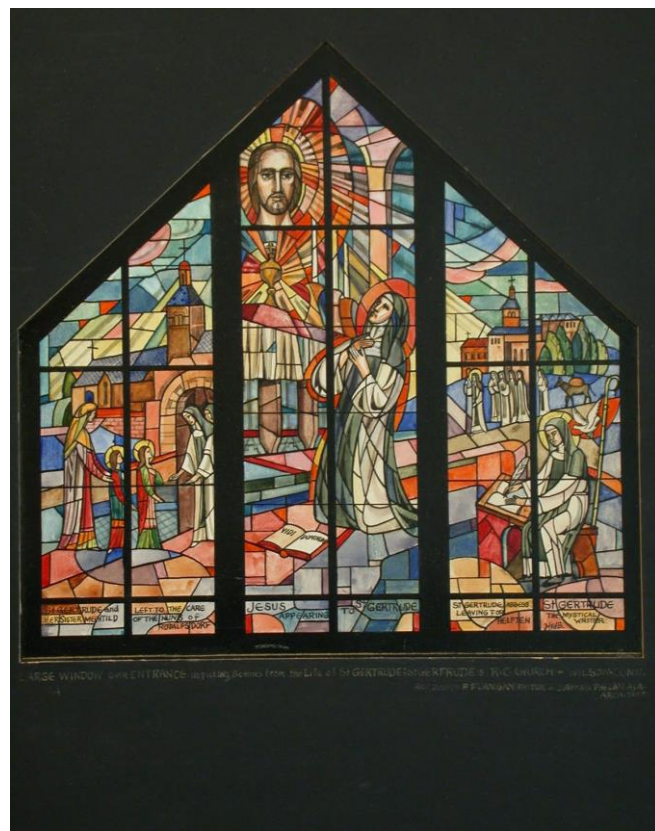
Devotion to the Sacred Heart Flourished among German Mystics of 14th Century

Benedictine monasteries in the Middle Ages were blessed with some very fervent nuns whom the Lord favored with mystical experiences. Several of these nuns were active in Helfta in Saxony. The Abbess, Mother Gertrude of Hackerborn, and Sisters Gertrude and Mechtilde were notable. Gertrude of Helfta was deeply devoted to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and wrote extensively in *The Herald of Divine Love* about the visions with which he favored her.

Known as St. Gertrude the Great, she was born in Germany in 1256, and she was raised from age 5 in the Benedictine monastery at Helfta. She had the first of her numerous visions when she was 26. Highly intelligent and well read, she had a great appetite for learning. She studied scripture, theology and the early church, was talented in music and art, and was dedicated to the sacred liturgy. Her published works also include *The Exercises of St. Gertrude*, and *The Book of Special Grace*, which she wrote in conjunction with her close friend and mentor, St. Mechtilde.

St. Gertrude speaks easily and naturally of her dedication to the Heart of Jesus. She often tells of her mystical experiences. On one Good Friday, Christ said to her: "Behold my Heart, let it be your temple ... for I desire that from now on my sacred humanity should be your cloister." On the feast of St. John the Apostle, she asked Christ to bless some of the religious under her charge. Christ answered: "I am like my Master in this. I love those who love me."

St. John bid her come with him to rest next to Christ's heart, like John the Apostle himself. John told her: "I have placed you at the opening of the Divine Heart, from where you may drink all the sweet



consolations which flow from it with such impetuous abundance, so that it is capable of satisfying all who desire to taste of it." In her mystical experiences, Gertrude felt herself being drawn into the Heart of Christ. Christ said: "I desire that you should remain indissolubly united to me, even as the body is united to the spirit, without which it cannot live for a moment."

Gertrude led many young sisters to recognize the treasures of Christ's Sacred Heart, and it is not surprising that this devotion flourished at this time in the Church's history.

During a long and painful illness, she continued to find her strength in Christ. "Until the age of 25, I was a blind and insane woman... but you, Jesus, deigned to grant me the priceless familiarity of your friendship by opening to me in every way that most noble casket of your divinity, which is your divine Heart, and offering me in great abundance all your treasures contained in it."

This newsletter is produced at Loyola High School, P.O. Box 1140, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania by Fr. Ted Walters, S.J. It is intended to remind us of the treasure Christ has committed to us in devotion to the Sacred Heart. Editorial contributions to this newsletter are warmly welcomed. Please send us the names and email addresses of additional persons who would like to receive issues of the newsletter. (To send such names or for items to contribute, you may email: <twalters2002@yahoo.co.uk> Thank you.)

The Middle Ages Bring Great New Attachment to the Heart of Christ

Beginning with the 12th century, more and more devout men and women invoked the Heart of Christ as the source of divine grace. John of Fécamp (†1078) already heralded this new appeal to the humanity of Christ: "The wound [in Christ's side], open wide to us, shows us the riches of his goodness toward us; that is, his wounded side shows us the charity of his Heart toward us." William of St. Thierry (†1148) summed up the spirit of this age of mysticism:

Through the open door of your side we wish to enter all the way to your Heart, the certain refuge of your mercy. We want to reach into your very soul, overflowing with the plenitude of God, filled with grace and truth, source of salvation and consolation. Open to us, Lord, the door in your side which leads to the inner sanctuary.... Happy those whom you lock in your Heart as in a hidden sanctuary. They are covered by your protecting wings who are hidden in the intimate recesses of your Heart.

Emphasis on the Heart of Christ developed easily in this age of Christocentric piety, with its increased attention to the sacred humanity of Christ, his Passion and his wounded side. All this pointed to a deeper sense of God's love for the human race symbolized by the love of Christ's Sacred Heart.

St. Bernard of Clairvaux (†1153) shows his intense devotion to the humanity of Christ:

The sword has transfixed Christ's soul; it has entered into his Heart, so that henceforth he may be able to have compassion on our infirmities. The secret of his Heart is discovered through the wounds of his body.

Beginning with the 13th century, there is somewhat less emphasis on the wound in Christ's side and more on the Heart itself. Peter Blosius (†1200) wrote:

The iron of the lance has penetrated even to his Heart, in order to show us that through his Heart the secrets of his Heart are revealed. Through the bodily opening the tender mercy of our God is seen.... The lance has opened to me the secret of the Lord. The lance is like a key that opens to me so that I may see how sweet the Lord is.

This century saw the emphasis on devotion to the Sacred Heart of the great Benedictine mystics of Helfta, Mechtild of Magdeburg (†1285), St. Mechtilde of Hackeborn (†1298) and St. Gertrude the Great (†1302). Mechtilde of Magdeburg wrote:

The Son of God appeared before me and, in his hands, he held his Heart. It was more radiant than the sun and it emitted bright rays of light on all sides. My beloved Master then made me understand that all the graces that God bestows unceasingly upon mankind issue from this same Heart.

One of Mechtilde's prayers was a favorite of St. Peter Canisius:

I praise and bless thee, sweetest and kindest Jesus, in and for all the good which thy glorious Godhead and thy holiest manhood have worked and will work by means of thy Heart. Hail, sweetest Heart of Jesus, most tuneful instrument of the Trinity. Hail, Heart of Jesus, flowing honey, living stream of all goodness and all grace. Hail, loving Heart of Jesus, most noble treasury of the riches of God. I bless and salute you a thousandfold in the divine goodness, of which you are the fountain and the source.

Dom Boutrais of Solesmes stated: "Never before and seldom in later times has anything been written on the effect of the divine Heart and its relation to men, to saints, to the souls in purgatory, such as we find in the writings of St. Gertrude and St. Mechtilde."

In the redemption of the world, the completion of the work was by Divine Providence reserved to the manifold power of that Spirit, who, in the creation, "adorned the heavens" (Job 26:13), and "filled the whole world" (Wisdom 1:7). (Pope Leo XIII, *Divinum Illud Munus*, 1)

Some feel that too little attention has been given to the work of the Holy Spirit in relation to the Sacred Heart devotion. We realize that this relationship has been much neglected. Christ, we know, redeemed the whole human race by his death and resurrection, and he showed us the way to holiness of life by his example and teaching. When he ascended to the Father, he left us the Holy Spirit to complete his work on earth. We begin by considering the Spirit's active role during Christ's life, then proceed to show some of the ways by which the Spirit was to extend Christ's work after his glorification.

Christ's Heart Formed by the Holy Spirit

Christ's saving and sanctifying actions were clearly a work of love. "I no longer call you servants, but I call you friends," he told the apostles. "Greater love than this," he said, "no man has than to lay down his life for his friends." (John 15:15, 13) Christ's love for us was evident in every action of his life, from his birth in Bethlehem to his ascension into heaven. It was frequently tied in with compassion. His heart was moved by the hunger of the crowd, by the sight of the poor and suffering, by the untimely death of the widow's son at Naim (Luke 7:11-17) and the death of his friend Lazarus, brother of Martha and Mary (John 11:1-44). Jesus was grieved over the fate of Jerusalem as he foresaw the terrible suffering that his people would undergo (Luke 13:34-35). Again and again in the Scriptures we sense the deeply human feelings of Christ's Sacred Heart.

What are the wellsprings of this love and compassion? When the Holy Spirit breathed a new life into the womb of the Blessed Virgin, he infused that life with his own divine love. Christ's heart developed little by little and would be the symbol of that love. At the time of his baptism, the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in the form of a dove, anointing him for the mission the Father had given him: "You are my son, today I have begotten you." (Lk 3:22) It was the fulfillment of the Song of the Servant in Isaiah 42:1 "Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit in him." Yves Congar notes that

this was the moment when Jesus was called and sent as the Messiah. (*I Believe*, I, 17) From that moment on, the love Christ showed and the feelings he experienced continually bore the mark of the Holy Spirit, who gave him the inspiration and courage to carry out his mission.

Inspiration to Holiness and Zeal

Not only was the Spirit the Sanctifier of Christ's humanity, but he was the inspiration of all the loving works he performed. When Christ ascended to the Father, these are the activities Christ wanted the Spirit to perform in our lives as well. First of all, he would be the means of our sanctification; he was to be the agent of our holiness. Being the Spirit of love himself, he would ground us and strengthen us in love (Eph 3:17), as the spirit of Christ grew in our hearts. And he would challenge us to carry forth the saving work of Christ, fired by the same zeal as Christ our Lord. He would inspire and strengthen our efforts in prayer, in charity for our neighbor, in bringing the gospel to people everywhere.

At work in the early Church

Christ told the apostles that the Father would send them the Holy Spirit to complete the work he had begun (John 14:16). In addition, since Christ chose followers who would be active in completing that work, it is clear that he expected them to carry out their mission with the power and inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

In God's overwhelming love, therefore, the Holy Spirit would, first, form disciples after the Heart of Christ and, second, he would inspire them to go forth as missionaries over all the world, to bring Christ's saving grace to countless lives. Thus, the twofold mission of Christ's love would be carried forth by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

This became clear on the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came in such fullness that the apostles became like new men, filled with courage and zeal. They were moved to go out and preach Jesus Christ to the masses of assembled people. Three thousand persons were won over to Christ and were baptized that day. In days to come, the apostles would see countless other examples of the power of the Spirit and the full flowering of his influence, as they preached Christ's gospel far and wide.

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Continuing Christ's Work

If the work that Christ had begun was not complete, what was needed to complete it? Its effects were too limited, its power did not reach deep enough, it did not extend far enough. Christ died to save an entire world; but it would be some time before the gospel was preached to people in every land. Besides, conversion was merely the first step; the life and faith of the followers of Christ needed to penetrate deep into the mystery of God's revelation and cover every aspect of the life of the Christian. Their faith needed to be grounded in love. And while Christ's ministry was restricted to a narrow area in Palestine, the apostles were to reach out to the very limits of the world and preach the gospel to people everywhere.

In all these areas, the key to the effective extension and penetration of Christ's loving work would be the Holy Spirit. We recall that St. John tells us that Christ loved his apostles and he loved them unto the end. (John 13:1). To convince them of his love and to reveal its power he would send them the Holy Spirit, "so that my own joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete." (John 15:11) Because of the Holy Spirit, the apostles' entire work would reflect the joy of Christ's Heart because, in St. Paul's words, it would be "rooted and grounded in love." Thus, Christ saw his work conjoined to the power of the Holy Spirit. If the apostles kept this vision, they would carry forth their missionary work joyfully in close conjunction with the divine Spirit of Love that Christ sent them.

Bringing Christ's Work to Completion

What are some of the ways by which the Holy Spirit brings the work of Christ's love to completion?

- 1) He inspires persons with a desire for holiness.
- 2) He stimulates Christ's followers to generous sacrifice in his service.
- 3) He promotes the work of preaching the Gospel.
- 4) He shows us how to make Christ's spirit active in every field: in law, medicine, religion, business, political life, family, education, etc.
- 5) He works to foster loving bonds and to soothe pained relations between persons living in close union.
- 6) He heals angry relations between enemies.

In these and in many other ways the Holy Spirit makes it possible for Christ to exercise his love through his followers in order to create a world where people can live happy lives and grow as God's sons and daughters on their way to eternal glory.

Thus, the actions of the Holy Spirit and the inspiration of Christ's Sacred Heart conspire to bring peace and salvation into the world. To separate the two would be like cutting an artery that supplies blood for the heart, or like denying air to a deep sea diver. Both growing in union with Christ and dynamic action in spreading the Gospel require the powerful energy of the Holy Spirit.

Inspiration of Christ's followers

Christ was obviously guided by the Spirit, but he did not speak about him clearly until after the Last Supper. When he sent the Spirit to fill the apostles with the courage and inspiration to carry on his work, the Spirit would pour out his gifts (see 1 Corinthians, cc. 12-14), so that they could share Christ's joy. He would help them understand and value Christ's words and the power of his love. Christ's soul was filled with the gifts of the Spirit, which he would pass on to his followers. And so, through the work of the Spirit, he would manifest the fullness of God's overflowing love and blessings.

The cult of the Sacred Heart was meant to prepare the world for a dynamic new infusion of the loving Spirit of God into the lives of people everywhere. Out of the powerful love of his Sacred Heart, Christ wants to send the Spirit more fully into our troubled world. To lose hope or want to give up today would be the most serious of errors. Christ wants only to share his life with the world he died for, in ever greater abundance.

In the overflowing love of Christ's Sacred Heart, God sent the Holy Spirit to show that he was opening the floodgates of divine revelation regarding grace, participation in the divine nature, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and union with the life of the Holy Trinity. These are topics full of meaning for persons dedicated to the Sacred Heart, as was noted in a 1969 article in the Directors' Service of the Apostleship of Prayer. Here is a subject that deserves more theological development.