



Mary's Immaculate Heart

Whenever we speak of the human "heart," we commonly say things like "What's on your heart?" or "That really touched my heart" or "I can tell that what you wrote came straight from the heart." In all of these ways we are speaking of the heart as a symbol of the deepest mystery of a person: what a person, deep down, really

thinks, feels, and desires.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us in entry 2563:

The heart is our *hidden center*, beyond the grasp of our reason and of others; only the Spirit of God can fathom the human heart and know it fully.

When we speak of the "Heart of Jesus," therefore, we are referring to the deepest mystery of His person: the unfathomable love of the divine Son of God Incarnate for His heavenly Father and for us.

In the book *Jesus, Mercy Incarnate* Dr. Robert Stackpole writes:

According to the Bible, some people are cold-hearted or hard-hearted; they have hearts of "stone" (e.g. Ezek 11:19). The mystery of the Heart of Jesus, however, has been revealed to us through the Gospels and beautifully expressed in His apparitions to St. Margaret Mary. Whatever we may say about other human hearts, this person, Jesus of Nazareth, has a heart that is aflame with love: love for His heavenly Father and love for us. That is why He showed His physical Heart to St. Margaret Mary as flaming with fire, surmounted by a cross, and pierced and surrounded by thorns. All of these were clear signs and symbols that *this Heart — the person of Jesus Christ — is pure love: the Sacred Heart of Jesus as all love and all lovable.* (Stockbridge: Marian Press, 2000, pp. 110-111)

In a similar way, when we speak of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, we are pointing to the deepest mystery of her person. We are pointing to the mystery of love that finds expression in all that she said, did, and suffered. That is why the Catholic Tradition symbolically depicts the heart of Mary as surrounded by flames, shining with light, and encircled by pure white flowers: because her deep, "hidden center" was completely pure, never stained by any sin at all (hence, we call her heart "Immaculate"). In fact, divine grace made heart was as transparent as a clean, clear-glass window, so that the fire and light of the Holy Spirit shone through her every thought, word, and deed at every moment.

Mary's Physical Heart and What it Signifies

The great troubadour of the heart of Mary was St. John Eudes (1601-1680). In beautiful French prose, he never tired of singing the wonders of her graces and virtues.

In his classic work, *The Admirable Heart of Mary*, St. John distinguished between the "corporeal" and "spiritual" hearts of Mary.

With regard to her corporeal or physical heart, he listed a number of privileges that her heart enjoyed, even when considered as a mere organ of her body:

The *first* prerogative consists in the fact that the heart is the principle of the life of our holy Mother. It is the principle of all the functions of her bodily, maternal life, ever holy in itself and in its every function and employment. It is the source of the life of the Mother of God, the life of her who gave birth to the only Son of God, the life of the woman through whom God gave life to all the children of Adam, sunk as they were in the abyss of eternal death. Finally, her heart is the source of a life so holy, so noble, so sublime that it is more precious in the sight of God than the lives of all the angels and men.

The *second* prerogative of the corporeal heart of Mary is that it produces the virginal blood with which the sacred body of the God-Man was formed in the chaste womb of the Blessed Mother.

The *third* prerogative of Mary's heart of flesh is that it was the source of the human, material life of the Infant Jesus during the nine months that he dwelt in Mary's sacred womb. While the infant is in its mother's bosom, the mother's heart is to such an extent the source of the infant's life that both the mother and the infant can be said to depend on it for their existence. Mary's admirable heart was therefore the source of the holy life of the Mother of God, and of her only son, the humanly divine as well as the divinely human life of the God-Man. (Saint John Eudes, *The Admirable Heart of Mary*. Buffalo, NY: Immaculate Heart Publications, reprint of 1947 edition, p. 14)

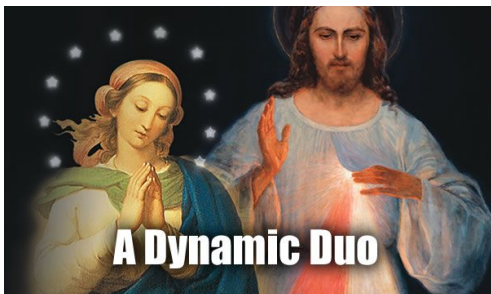
Every mother can appreciate what St. John Eudes is saying here. A mother knows and feels that both she and her child totally depend upon the life-blood circulating within her at every moment. Indeed, the first sound that a child ever hears is the beating of his own mother's heart.

If such was the dignity of Mary's heart considered merely as an organ of her body, how much greater was the dignity of what her physical heart also signifies: the deepest mystery of her person, her immeasurable love for God and for us. St. John Eudes puts it this way:

If the virginal heart beating in the consecrated breast of the Virgin of virgins, the most excellent organ of her holy body, is so admirable, as

we have already seen, what must be the marvels of her spiritual heart?... We have already considered the rare prerogatives of her heart of flesh, and we shall now endeavor to express the incomparable gifts and inestimable treasures with which her spiritual heart is filled....

First of all, divine bounty miraculously preserved the heart of the Mother of our Savior from the stain of sin, which never touched it because God filled it with grace from the moment of its creation, and clothed it with purity so radiant that, next to God's, it is impossible to conceive of greater purity. His divine majesty possessed her heart so completely from its first instant that it never ceased to belong entirely to Him and to love Him more ardently than all the holiest hearts of Heaven and earth united. (*The Admirable Heart of Mary*, p. 20).



Mary's Heart Leads to Divine Mercy

As we have seen from the articles in this series on the Immaculate Conception, Mary's heart was filled to overflowing with divine love right from the first moment of her life. However, it was still possible for her to experience an increase of grace and an increase of the virtues of faith and love. After all, Mary was (and

is) a real human being, a woman who experienced all the joys, pains, and sorrows of a fully human existence. This means that the more she surrendered in love and trust to the Holy Spirit day by day, in every circumstance, the stronger those virtues in her heart became.

While she possessed the unique, original grace of an Immaculate Conception, this was only the starting point of an increase of grace in her heart throughout her life journey. In a similar way, for us the grace we are given in Baptism is only the beginning of a whole lifetime of opportunities to grow in grace (See Eph 5:18; I Pet 2: 2-3; II Pet 3:18).

In his book *True Devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary* (2005), Fr. Robert Fox gave to the Church a clear exposition of the Blessed Virgin's journey into ever-deeper holiness, and we shall quote his excellent treatment of this subject at length. He wrote:

What is holiness? Essentially holiness is the possession of sanctifying grace. It is made present in a person from the moment of baptism, making one resemble God. ... We grow in holiness by doing the will of God once His sanctifying grace is implanted in our souls at baptism. Then everything done for the love of God makes one grow in grace. An increase of grace is achieved by every good work, every prayer, every loving act. ...

God first loves us. If we respond in faith to his love, we grow in grace. That grace first given to children in baptism is entirely out of the goodness of God's heart, with no act of faith or response on their part. The same was true of Mary in an eminent way. Mary did not merit her Immaculate Conception ... this is why Mary is called God's masterpiece. He has given this woman a dignity worthy of his Mother, with more grace than all the angels and saints taken together. ...

- What growth of grace took place in her at the Annunciation! ... God chose to use her Immaculate Heart to accept the Savior in freely agreeing to become the Mother of the Most High, the Word incarnate, the Messiah, the long-awaited One. ...

- Mary says "Yes." The increase of grace in the soul of Mary when she answers "Yes" for the whole world is unimaginable. The fact that God in his loving providence looked to the free consent of Mary for the Word to be made flesh and dwell among us gives a Marian quality to every aspect of Christianity. ...

- There was then the carrying of the Word made flesh in her holy womb for nine months. She became the world's first tabernacle for the Word Incarnate. Today in the tabernacles of our churches, He is present in the Most Blessed Sacrament... as she carried Him under her heart she continuously grew in grace. ...

- Grace grew in Mary as she nurtured the infant Jesus, tended to His growing needs, served Him at table, performed domestic duties. In a human way she taught Jesus as any good mother teaches her child. ...

- Mary was with Jesus to the end as He hung dying on the cross, redeeming the world. As grace was merited for the world, abundant grace flowed into her Immaculate Heart during those hours beneath the cross of redemption. ...

- Mary grew in grace after the Ascension of Christ by the reception of her divine incarnate Son in Holy Communion. After the redemptive acts of the Cross, the Apostle John took her into his own home (see Jn 19:27). We may be sure that our Blessed Lady received the Holy Eucharist frequently, even daily, as was the practice of the early Christians (see Acts 2:46). She lived with John the priest, the beloved disciple. ...

- The Holy Spirit came upon Mary when she conceived the Christ Child. Now that the Church is to be identified as Christ's body, with the Holy Spirit as its Soul, this Spirit of Love descended upon all in the upper room and found a special temple adorned for His presence in Mary's heart. ...

- Such magnificent beauty, such radiant brightness of the light of life, we see in Mary's Immaculate Heart. (Father Robert J. Fox, *True Devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary*. Fatima Family Apostolate International, 2005, pp. 84, 90, 92-96)

The result of this incredible journey of growth in grace was that Mary's heart became the source of the greatest possible joy to the Heart of Jesus. Proverbs 8:31 tells us that "The Lord's delight is in the children of men," and in the gospels we are taught that the Good Shepherd "rejoices" whenever He finds His lost sheep and brings them home (Lk 15:5-7).

How much greater must be His delight in the heart of His mother Mary, whose soul was always perfectly receptive to His grace, and never failed to return love for love!

Mary's Immaculate Heart is Full of Divine Mercy

At the same time, while Mary was growing every day in sanctifying grace, and united at all times, in the center of her soul, with the Heart of her Son, she was also completely filled with His merciful love. Saint John Eudes tells us:

To the heart of Mary God communicated in great abundance His merciful inclinations, and established in it the throne and reign of His mercy more gloriously than the heart of any other creature, save the sacred humanity of Christ.

Divine Mercy reigns so perfectly in Mary's heart that she bears the name of Queen and Mother of Mercy. And the most loving Mary has so completely won the heart of God's mercy that He has given her the key to all His treasures, and made her absolute mistress of them. St. Bernard says, "She is called the Queen of Mercy because she opens the abyss and treasure of divine mercy to whom she chooses, when she chooses, and as she chooses."

Divine Mercy holds such complete sway over Mary's heart and fills it with such compassion for sinners and for all persons in need that Saint Augustine addresses her thus, "Thou art the sinner's only hope" after God. "My dearest children, " says Saint Bernard, "her heart is the ladder by which sinners go up to heaven; this is my reliance; this is the only reason of my hope." (*The Admirable of Heart of Mary*, pp. 126-127)

What does this mean for us today? It means that Mary's heart is now a living fountain of divine love and sanctifying grace. She looks upon the hearts of her children as parched and arid ground, but with plenty of potential, needing only to be watered by divine grace, and planted with the seeds of the gospel in order to spring into abundant life.

In fact, there is no place in the whole created universe where we can draw closer to the Heart of Jesus than the heart of Mary. Her heart is the chapel where Jesus forever dwells, ready to pour out His merciful love upon us whenever we come to Him.

Let us always seek Him there, in the Heart of Mary, where we shall always surely find Him.

Prayer

Blessed John Henry Newman's Litany to the Immaculate Heart of Mary
Immaculate Heart of Mary, gentle and humble of heart—make our hearts like the Heart of Jesus.

Heart of Mary—pray for us!

Heart of Mary, united with the Heart of Jesus,

Heart of Mary, Temple of the Trinity,

Heart of Mary, home of the Incarnate Word,

Heart of Mary, overflowing with grace,

Heart of Mary, blessed among all hearts,

Heart of Mary, abyss of humility,

Heart of Mary, sacrifice of love,

Heart of Mary, crucified,

Heart of Mary, consolation of the afflicted,

Heart of Mary, refuge of sinners,

Heart of Mary, hope of the dying,

Heart of Mary, seat of mercy,

Heart of Mary—pray for us!

Immaculate Mary, gentle and humble of heart—make our hearts like the Heart of Jesus.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What does the Catholic Tradition mean by the human "heart"—and especially the Heart of Jesus?
2. How can we grow in grace, throughout our life journey, as the heart of Mary did?
3. How would you describe "the heart of Mary" to someone who had never heard this phrase before?