

Feast of the Sacred Heart

June 23, 2017

Sister Nancy Kaczmarek, GNSH

When I started writing this reflection, my attention gradually turned from looking for other people's reflections to the history of devotion to the Sacred Heart. As I was doing that, I heard a quiet voice in the back of my mind that eventually got loud enough that I had to pay attention to it. It was one of my friends, saying, "*You sound like a professor.*" So I stopped looking at the history. But then I thought, "Well?"

What surprised me was seeing how ancient devotion to the Heart of Jesus is. It goes back to the second century and St. Justin Martyr—"*We're carved out of his heart as from a rock.*" Irenaeus of Lyons, who died in 202, spoke of "*living water that flows to us from the Heart of Christ.*"

We associate the Feast of the Sacred Heart with St. Margaret Mary Alacoque and her visions of Jesus' Sacred Heart, but that wasn't until the 1670s. Even before that, St. John Eudes worked for a celebration of the Sacred Heart, writing the Divine Office and Mass for the Feast. The first celebration of the feastday was in 1672, before Margaret Mary's first vision in 1673.

The heart was considered the essence of the person. Jean-Jacques Olier, who founded the Sulpicians in the 1600s, had his heart preserved when he died, which was the custom in those days. As Father Lowell Glendon said to us thirty years ago: "*The corporeal heart came at that period to symbolize everything that was good and rich and deep about that person.*"

Heart, as used in the Bible, encompasses quite a number of ideas. It means the center of physical being—Old Testament characters talked about hearts the way we talk about minds or brains. It means the hidden depths of a person's outlook on life. When God sends Samuel to show God's choice of a king for Israel from among Jesse's sons, Samuel looks at the first son and thinks, That is one good-looking dude. He must be God's chosen. But God says, Nope. Don't judge by appearance. "*People look at the outward appearance, but I look at the heart*" (1Sam. 16, 7). Jeremiah says that, "*God tests the hearts of people.*" In 1 Corinthians and Romans, Paul writes about the *hidden counsels of the heart*. So when we speak of the Sacred Heart as the expression of God's love, we are only partly right. The heart really reflects someone's interior life. Father Glendon says, "*Cardinal Berulle, our own (Sulpician) Father Jean-Jacques Olier, John Eudes, and others who were part of the French school saw in the*

Sacred Heart a symbol of the interior life of Jesus. And it wasn't even just primarily love. . . it was all of that reality that we would call today the spiritual life, the inner life, the secret deep recesses of his spirit. It was everything by which Jesus stood in union with God and everything that Jesus brought to his life and ministry, to his death and resurrection. All of that wonder—the consciousness of Jesus would be the way we put it today.”

That's the tradition that came down through the French school. Father Normant, a Sulpician himself, would have viewed the Sacred Heart like that, as would the Ursulines who educated Marguerite. So it's likely that that was her attitude toward the Sacred Heart, also.

So if we want to celebrate the feast rightly, we need to reflect on how Jesus saw the world.

Think about:

- The twelve-year-old who was so enthralled with the discussion of Scripture in the temple that he completely didn't notice that his people had started for home;
- The young man who knew he was called. As Luke quotes Jesus, *“Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing;”*
- The man of prayer, who spent hours in prayer and emerged from them with a new sense of his calling, extending his ministry to other towns and regions;
- The preacher who engaged women in conversation and rewarded their faith;
- The mystic who saw beyond the rules of his religion to the call of his Father, his Abba, and told the people how to live in response to that call;
- The man who knew, who had seen, what happens to men who stand up to the authorities and did so anyway because it was what his Father wanted. *“Yet not my will but yours be done.”*

In today's second reading, John tells us, *“Beloved, if God so loved us, we also must love one another. . . . If we love one another, God remains in us, and his love is brought to perfection in us.”* Sister Julia said it well in her letter for this feastday: *“Let us celebrate our call to “put on the mind and heart of Jesus” each day as we rise to minister to the needs of creation through contemplation, presence and actions.”* As we continue to learn to see as Jesus saw, we can't help but lavish God's love on those in our lives and become more fearless in living out our lives in God.