

The Sacred Heart is not doctrine, it is devotion. Cardinal Newman referred to this distinction in the last century; in a letter dated January 1855 he writes:

“There is a marked contrast in Catholicity between the views presented to us by doctrine and devotion respectively. Doctrines never change, devotions vary with each individual. Catholics allow each other, accordingly, the greatest license (...) as regards devotions, whereas they are most sensitive about doctrine.”

The Council of Ephesus in 431AD declared that Mary is *Theotokos* – ‘Godbearer’ or ‘God-birther’; like all Marian titles, this refers primarily not to Mary but to Jesus Christ and it is doctrine; on the other hand, prayers and intercessions to Mary, rosaries and litanies are devotion. Behind popular devotion to all the various saints from St Philomena through St Anthony of Padua to St Thérèse of Lisieux, is the doctrine of the Communion of Saints. Devotion flows from doctrine and expresses it in a particular way, but they are not the same thing. As Newman says,

doctrine is universal, but devotion is very much a personal – even – private – matter.

The Sacred Heart is devotion; the doctrine behind it is God's love for us in his Son's self-sacrifice on the cross. It has long suffered from its iconography: Jesus has most often been portrayed as impossibly golden-haired and blue-eyed or wearing a sickly-sweet expression; considering the deep psychological and spiritual importance of this devotion, it is a great pity. But don't let yourself be put off.

Devotion to the Sacred Heart emerged during the 13<sup>th</sup> century out of devotion to the wounds inflicted upon the Lord during his Passion and Crucifixion – which itself was widespread during the Crusades; however, it was popularized world-wide in the 17<sup>th</sup> century by St Margaret Mary Alacoque. Since then, it has long been established as a Catholic devotion in the universal Church.

The heart of Christ is the great reconciler.

We live in a world of duality; it is one of the building-blocks of every dimension of life in this world: life itself is characterised by pairs of opposites. So much

so, that we can scarcely think of any one energy or principle or quality or idea or thing without thinking of its opposite. In fact, every energy, principle, quality, idea and thing is defined as what it is by virtue of its opposite: in other words, knowing the identity of something includes knowing the identity of its opposite. How would we know what day was if there was no night? Or white if there was no black? How would we know what it is to be kind, if we never knew what it is to be unkind? How would we know what love and mercy was if we had no idea of hatred and hardness of heart? One couldn't exist without the other – *in this world*.

Sometimes this can make life very painful: the more we seek God, for example, the more we are brought face-to-face with the devil in ourselves; the more we long for the light, the more we find ourselves in shadow. St Paul famously lamented this 'conflict of opposites' in himself: 'The good that I would do I do not, and the evil I would not do, I do.' The most richly articulate symbol of suffering the conflict of opposites is Christ stretched out on the cross. One arm

stretched painfully taut to the right, the other, equally painfully, to the left. Yet, in the middle, at the intersection of the horizontal and the vertical beams, is a place of balance, stillness and peace: the heart. The heart of Christ. The importance of the Sacred Heart is precisely this reconciling power.

Christ was crucified in *our* world, in *this* world, not the next: because it is only in this world that we have to suffer the conflict of opposites; in the realm of God's kingdom we shall know with certainty that all dualities are but different expressions and manifestations of the same single Spirit. Unity of being is one of the chief characteristics of the kingdom because God is love and love always and in every circumstance seeks unity. John-Paul II said that physical love between spouses is the highest manifestation in the world of divine unity.

Because all things came into being through love, all things yearn for unity, unity of being – which means not feeling oneself alone in the universe, cut off from others, isolated within oneself and unable to communicate how one feels. This is something akin to

something that Blaise Pascal experienced when he wrote in 1670:

“[I feel] engulfed in the infinite immensity of spaces whereof I know nothing, and which know nothing of me, I am terrified. The eternal silence of these infinite spaces alarms me.”

Sometimes this universal human yearning for unity is understood, sometimes not, but it will never go away. It can lift you up into holiness or it can cast you into a urine-soaked doorway wrapped in a filthy blanket. The yearning is exactly the same – in the second case it is unrecognized or misunderstood.

Everything in this world that manifests or reveals unity is a symbol, to one degree or another, of the fulfilment of that yearning; a symbol of the wholeness of being that will be ours when all is restored in Christ. To take an example from nature: why have dawn and twilight always been seen as such special times? Why have they inspired so much poetry, so much art? Why is it such a grand thing to watch the sun set and rise in a sky of blood-red, gold and translucent blue? Because dawn and twilight are the

two times when night and day are not two but one, when they are reconciled, no longer opposites but reflections of each other, in each other.

Dawns and twilights fade, and no symbol of unity in this world can last – in God's kingdom, duality has never even existed.

The Sacred Heart is the perfect symbol of the reconciliation of opposites and wholeness of being, and is spiritually and psychologically transformative.

Two apparent contraries – heart and fire – represent the reconciliation of *every* possible pair of contraries in the world and the human person:

The fire is spirit, the heart is matter...

The fire is masculine, the heart is feminine...

The fire is father, the heart is mother...

The fire is intellect, the heart is feeling...

The fire is passion, the heart is *compassion*...

The fire is Logos, the heart is Eros...

The fire is justice, the heart is love...

The fire is trial, the heart is triumph...

As a person, Jesus himself was characterised by such wholeness of being: he was quite comfortable

comparing himself to a mother hen and did not hesitate to show his emotion with tears and sighs or publicly demonstrate his tenderness and pity – all of which is the heart; on the other hand, he also expressed righteous anger and castigated the hypocrites, even resorting on one occasion in the temple to violence – all of which is the fire.

Above all, the Sacred Heart is a symbol of that *ultimate* unity of being and wholeness to which God calls every creature at the end of all things. In this unity and wholeness God will see, recognize and love himself in the face of creation – and creation will see, recognise and love itself in the face of God. One will be a mirror of the other. This is the meaning of existence. It is the meaning that the Sacred Heart symbolises.