

Sacred Heart talk

Fr. John Czyzynski, SCJ, at Sacred Heart parish in Appleton, WI, June 13, 2021

Many years ago, when I was part of the staff at Sacred Heart Seminary and School of Theology in Hales Corners, a priest named Don Senior, who was the President-Rector of Chicago Theological Union, gave us a day of recollection and in one of his talks he made a statement which I wish were displayed in every church in the world. He said: “we have no idea how crazy God is about us.” That expression gets at the heart and soul of what devotion to the Sacred Heart is all about. Sacred Heart devotion is about the God who loves us tremendously, whose love became incarnate in Jesus and is symbolized by His heart which was pierced for us. God asks that we return love to the God who first loves us and that we show that love by a genuine love for our sisters and brothers especially the poor and the marginalized, those on the fringes of society.

When most people talk about devotion to the Sacred Heart they will mention the promises of the Sacred Heart to St. Margaret Mary Alacoque, the nine first Fridays and enthronement of the Sacred Heart in the home. Those are good pious practices, but they are not the real essence of true devotion to the Sacred Heart. True devotion to the Sacred Heart is not about some pious practices. It is a lifestyle, a way of living that is dedicated to living in loving obedience to God that is expressed in genuine love for our sisters and brothers.

What I want to present to you is based on an encyclical that Pope Pius XII wrote in 1956. The name of the encyclical is HAURIETIS AQUAS, the Latin words with which the encyclical begins. They are taken from the book of the prophet Isaiah 12:3 “you shall draw waters joyfully from the streams of salvation.”

Near the beginning of that encyclical the Pope makes the following outstanding statement. He says: “...it is perfectly clear that this devotion (devotion to the Sacred Heart), if we examine its proper nature, is the most excellent act of religion.” The word religion comes from the Latin word “religare” which means to tie something back. So what the Pope is saying is that when we really understand what devotion to the Sacred Heart is all about and practice it, it is the most excellent way that we can be tied back to God, the most excellent way that we can be connected with God.

Pope Pius XII then proceeds to go through numerous passages in Scripture and he quotes the Fathers of the Church to establish the solid foundation for devotion to the Sacred Heart that goes back to the beginnings of salvation history and has been passed on to us down through the centuries. We do not have time to go through all those passages, but I want to concentrate on the readings that have been assigned for today’s liturgy as we celebrate the feast of the Sacred Heart.

In the reading from the prophet Hosea we have such tender expressions of God’s love for Israel, for us. Hosea uses the gestures that a mother and father use to show love for their child. Those of you here who are parents know these gestures. You have used them and those who are sons and daughters have received them. God says: I loved you like a son (a daughter). I taught you to walk. I took you in my arms and drew you to myself with bonds of love. I raised you to my cheek as if you were a little infant. I stooped to feed you. My heart is overwhelmed (just filled with love for you.) God says: at times you offend me and my anger blazes but I will not give into it. God says: when you get angry you

at times lash out against one another, but I am God, not a human person. Don't expect me when I am angry to act like you when you are angry. My love is so much bigger than yours. That is the way Hosea describes the tender love of God for us. That is the love of the Sacred Heart for us.

Then we have Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Paul says I was given the grace to let the gentiles (that's us) know about the "inscrutable" riches of Christ's love for us. INSCRUTABLE is not a word we use every day. I looked it up in the dictionary. It means: "incapable of being searched into and understood, incomprehensible, unfathomable."

What Paul was saying is that he had the privilege of telling people about this marvelous love of God for us, but it is so wonderful, it is beyond his ability to describe it and beyond our ability to fully understand it. So Paul does what we all do when we are faced with an impossible task. He falls on his knees and prays, and listen to what he prays for. He says: "I pray that God will help you to be rooted and grounded in love so that with all the holy people on the journey of life you would be able to comprehend the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of Christ for you."

Father Leo John Dehon, the founder of my religious community, the Priests of the Sacred Heart, expressed that same idea using some different images. He said: "We must swim in the love of the Sacred Heart as a fish in water; we must immerse ourselves in this celestial atmosphere like birds in the air. That is the way God's love surrounds and holds and carries us.

Then we come to the gospel for today which describes the final scene of Jesus' crucifixion. The text says that the soldiers broke the legs of the two thieves (to hasten their death), but when they came to Jesus, they saw He was already dead so they didn't break His legs, but to be sure, one of the soldiers pierced His side with a lance and a marvelous thing occurred. Blood and water came out.

From earliest times the blood and water that flowed from Jesus's pierced side, His pierced Heart, have been interpreted as signs of Eucharist (the blood) and Baptism (the water). These are the key sacraments of the Church. The Fathers of the Church interpret this action as the birth of the Church (the Mother of all the faithful) coming from the side of Christ the new Adam, as Eve (the mother of all living) came from the side of the first Adam. In His dying moments Jesus continues to extend His love, God's love for us. He gives us the power to be baptized and become by adoption what He is by nature, namely children of God, to live with the life of Christ in us through Baptism and by giving us the Eucharist Jesus gives us His very self to nurture the divine life in us so we can be strengthened to live as He has taught us to live and to love.

At every Eucharist this total offering of Jesus for love of us and in loving obedience to the Father is made present again sacramentally. We have the opportunity to unite ourselves with Jesus and to offer ourselves with Him back to the God who first loves us so much.

Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus is what is truly needed in our world today. There is so much anger, conflict and hatred going on all around us and we cannot help but be affected by it. What keeps being emphasized are the differences among us and we are failing to remember what we all have in common. We are all sons and daughters of God, brothers and sisters to one another. We need to push against what is going on all around us and be people of heart like the Heart of Jesus and resist all that division. We need to let our hearts be touched by what is going on around us and reach

out with our hands in loving service of one another.

I once saw a picture that showed Mary holding the infant Jesus in her arms and another lady, apparently a friend of Mary's, looks at Jesus and she says to Mary: "Oh, Mary, He's got your jaw." Mary smiles and says: "yes, but He's got His Father's eyes." Yes, Jesus surely has God's eyes and looks on all of us as His beloved sisters and brothers and He wants us to do the same thing, to look at each other with God's eyes and see one another as God sees us.

Sacred Heart devotion unites love of God and love of neighbor.

Jesus told a parable about the last judgment which is narrated in the 25th chapter of Matthew's gospel. The people are gathered before the judgment seat of God and are divided into two groups, one on the right and one on the left. Jesus says to those on the right: "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was sick and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me, a stranger and you welcomed me." And they reply: "when did we ever see You that way and look after you." Jesus says: "when you did it to the least of your sisters and brothers you did it for me." These persons did not stop and make a good intention to serve Jesus in those around them. They just saw people in need and responded with love.

Jesus receives as done to Him what is done to those in need. Louis Evely wrote a book called "That Man is You." In that book he made a powerful statement. He wrote: "we bear the same relationship to God as we do to our neighbor and we are no closer to God than we are to them." In Sacred Scripture we have the same message stated even more powerfully in the first letter of St. John. This gentle loving apostle has a strong message. He says: "if anyone says I love God, but hates his brother (or sister) THAT PERSON IS A LIAR. Because whoever does not love a brother (or sister) whom he sees cannot love God whom he does not see."

I believe you take a justified pride in being a parish that is dedicated to the Sacred Heart. Let me draw my remarks to a conclusion by suggesting something that I believe would deepen your dedication to the Sacred Heart. We cherish the last words of people we love. One of the last things that Jesus said to His disciples at the last supper and what He prayed for was that they would be one. Let the way you live in this parish, the way you treat one another, be an answer to the unity that Jesus prayed for and may you be a welcoming community. May anyone who comes to this parish find your doors and your hearts open to them no matter how different they may be from you. May they feel and know that they will be treated with love and respect in this parish. There is a song called "All are Welcome." Let that be the theme song of this parish. If that song isn't just on your lips, but is evident in the way everyone is treated who either lives in this parish or who comes here, that will bring down God's blessing upon you. It is the best way to live up to the name of your parish and the best way to practice true devotion to the Sacred Heart.