

He So Loved Us

First Friday devotion

BY JOHAN VAN PARYS, PHD

On October 24, 2024, Pope Francis issued the fourth encyclical of his pontificate, entitled *Dilexit Nos* or “He loved us.” This encyclical is dedicated to the “Human and Divine Love of the Heart of Jesus Christ.” The release of this encyclical coincided with the 350th anniversary of the first apparition of the Sacred Heart to St. Margaret Mary Alacoque in 1673.

At the outset of *Dilexit Nos*, Pope Francis deplores the depreciation of the human heart in favor of reason, will, and freedom. “If we devalue the heart,” he wrote, “we also devalue what it means to speak from the heart, to act with the heart, to cultivate and heal the heart. If we fail to appreciate the specificity of the heart, we miss the messages that the mind alone cannot

communicate; we miss out on the richness of our encounters with others; we miss out on poetry. We also lose track of history and our own past, since our real personal history is built with the heart. At the end of our lives, that alone will matter.”

As a powerful antidote to this dangerous loss of attention to the heart, Pope Francis offers the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus when we “contemplate and adore the whole Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man, represented by an image that accentuates his heart... as the privileged sign of the inmost being of the incarnate Son and his love, both divine and human. More than any other part of his body, the heart of Jesus is the natural sign and symbol of his boundless love.”

Devotion to the Sacred Heart is rooted in a deep gratitude for the love Christ extends to all of us even unto death on the cross. Early devotion to this selfless love was focused on the side of Jesus that was pierced while he hung on the Cross. Saint Augustine saw Christ’s wounded side as “the symbol of our intimate union with Christ, the setting of an encounter of love.” Saint Bernard saw it as the sign of Christ’s boundless mystery of love and mercy.

Over time, this boundless love of Christ became associated with his heart. Specific devotions to the Heart of Jesus started to emerge around the tenth century. Between the 13th and 16th centuries, many religious communities developed a deep devotion to the Heart of Jesus. In his Encyclical on the Sacred Heart, Pope Francis references the many women — including Saints Lutgarde and Mechtilde of Hackeborn, Saint Angela of Foligno, and Dame Julian of Norwich — who described their profound encounters with Christ as “resting in his heart.”

The theological basis for the devotion to the Sacred Heart was first established by the



Fr. Daniel Griffith initiated First Friday Devotions in September of 2024 at The Basilica. The prayers are for the intention of healing – healing in our hearts, in our families, in the Church, in our nation, and in our world.



The popular image of the Sacred Heart, based on the visions of Sister Mary Margaret Alacoque, shows Jesus presenting his heart to us. It is a heart on fire with boundless love for us. It is topped with a crown of thorns that reminds us of Jesus' sacrificial love for us. In turn, this image calls us to a profound sense of gratitude and invites us to share in his same sacrificial love for God's people. (This Sacred Heart is located near the elevator in The Basilica.)

Polish Jesuit and mystic Kasper Druzbicki (1590–1662). The Feast of the Sacred Heart was first celebrated in the Diocese of Rennes in France on August 31, 1670, at the request of Saint John Eudes (1601-1680), who wrote the liturgical texts for this feast. The celebration of the feast quickly gained popularity in other parts of France.

A pivotal figure in the popularization of the devotion to the Sacred Heart was Sister Mary Margaret Alacoque (1647-1690), a French Visitation sister and mystic. She was deeply affected by the spirituality of Saint Francis de Sales (1567-1622), who, together with Saint Jane de Chantal (1572-1641), founded the Order of Visitation. Saint Francis de Sales had a deep devotion to the Sacred Heart that he summarized in a sermon he preached on February 20, 1618, the second Sunday of Lent: "This most adorable and lovable heart of our Master, burning with the love which he professes to us, [is] a

heart on which all our names are written. ... Surely it is a source of profound consolation to know that we are loved so deeply by our Lord, who constantly carries us in his heart."

Between the end of December 1673 and June 1675, Sister Mary Margaret Alacoque had several visions in which Christ revealed his heart to her and spoke of his love for humankind. The many revelations can be summed up by one of the messages Sister Mary Margaret Alacoque received: "This is the heart that so loved human beings that it has spared nothing, even to emptying and consuming itself in order to show them its love."

During these visions, Christ not only spoke of his love for us, but he also lamented the lack of reciprocated love. He called for a universal feast that would celebrate his love and repair the lack of love shown him. In addition, Jesus asked that a devotion to the Sacred Heart be established on the first Friday of the month. In return, he promised many graces to those observing First Fridays including that "my Heart will be their secure refuge in their last hour."

Although the feast had been celebrated much earlier in many places, it was not until 1856 that Pope Pius IX established the Feast of the Sacred Heart on the Friday after the Solemnity of Corpus Christi as obligatory for the whole Church.

Pope Leo XIII contributed greatly to the advancement of devotion to the Sacred Heart. In 1889 he gave permission for priests worldwide to celebrate the Votive Mass of the Sacred Heart on the first Friday of each month, thus universalizing what Christ asked of Sister Mary Margaret Alacoque at the end of the 17th century. At the request of another mystic, Sister Mary of the Divine Heart, Pope Leo XIII consecrated the entire human race to the Sacred Heart on June 11, 1899. In the same year he approved a new official Litany of the Sacred Heart by combining several such litanies which had become popular since the end of the 17th century.

In 1956, Pope Pius XII promoted devotion to the Sacred Heart as an important

First Friday

At The Basilica of Saint Mary, we celebrate the First Friday of the month (September through May) in the St. Joseph Chapel with the celebration of the Eucharist at noon, followed by Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament and an hour of Adoration with the recitation of the Litany of the Sacred Heart.

dimension of Christian Spirituality because on the one hand it honors the person of Jesus Christ and on the other hand it celebrates his boundless love for us. Fifty years later Pope Benedict XVI wrote: "By encouraging devotion to the Heart of Jesus," Pope Pius XII "exhorted believers to open themselves to the mystery of God and of his love and to allow themselves to be transformed by it."

Several passages in Pope Francis' encyclical on the Sacred Heart are dedicated to the transformative power of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. He ends his encyclical by asking Christ "to grant that his Sacred Heart may continue to pour forth the streams of living water that can heal the hurt we have caused, strengthen our ability to love and serve others, and inspire us to journey together towards a just and fraternal world." ✚

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