

## Devotion to the Sacred Heart

John McDade SJ

*(The Way Supplement March 2001)*

Even when he's wrong, Karl Barth is always worth listening to. Suddenly, in the full-flow of his *Church Dogmatics*, Barth unleashes a Calvinist thunderbolt in an ecumenically placid sky, attacking the Catholic devotion to the Sacred Heart as a form of 'Jesus-worship' and 'a deification of the creature'. It is an instance, he says, of a 'Christology or christological doctrine or practice which aims at making the human nature, the historical and psychological manifestation of Jesus as such, its object', and he regards it as a deviation analogous to 'neo-Protestant faith in the religious hero Jesus'.<sup>1</sup> In his view, the 'historical Jesus' of Liberal Protestantism

was purposely discovered, or invented, in order to indicate an approach to Jesus Christ which circumvents his divinity, the approach to a revelation which is generally understandable and possible in the form of human judgment and experience....In the Heart of Jesus cult, too, it is blatantly a matter of finding a generally illuminating access to Jesus Christ which evades the divinity of the Word.....The objection is that by direct glorification of Christ's humanity as such the divine Word is evaded and camouflaged.<sup>2</sup>

So for Barth, Sacred Heart devotion venerates a general, human idol that replaces the Incarnate Word, treating Jesus' humanity an 'object of manifestation' rather than 'God's revelation in Its human-ness'.<sup>3</sup> It is, in other words, an essentially human (and, therefore for Barth, a distorting) symbol which we project out of the religious impulses of our nature, and this all-too-human quality impedes a proper engagement with the radically other, Incarnate Word.

It is not my intention to enter further into Barth's Christological objections because I think his judgement that Sacred Heart devotion 'evades the divinity of the Word' is simply obtuse. But I want to focus on two points underlying his objections which seem to me to be acute and important. First of all, I want to insist that his real resistance to the devotion is at the level not of theological accuracy but of sensibility: theologically, the devotion has every claim to be sound and to be underpinned by a rich Biblical, Incarnational theology, as a glance at *The Litany of the Sacred Heart* will show, but the complex of attitudes and feelings which it generates feels odd and obstructive to Barth and perhaps also to us. Secondly, he is extremely suspicious of what human religiosity does to divine truth when, like an energetic dog, it escapes from the leash.

With regard to the first point, the comparison Barth makes between the devotion and Liberal Protestantism is strange. What on earth could lead him to say that the Christology expressed in Sacred Heart devotion is as damaging to Christian faith as that of liberal Protestantism which presents Jesus as the paradigm of human perfection? It is a *mésalliance* of the most ridiculous kind. He splutters angrily in the face of the visual and rhetorical expressiveness of Catholic religion which so infuriates him that he can only compare it with his other favourite *bête noire*, Liberal Protestantism. His objections to the devotion simply mask a Protestant discomfort with the devotion, cult, art, symbol, imagery and rhetoric of Catholic piety, particularly its Baroque manifestations. (Barth's Protestant problem is not too far from our general cultural problem in relating sympathetically to post-Tridentine religion.)

And this bears upon the second point: the trouble is that, deep down, Barth doesn't really understand *religion*. (Nor, I suspect, do most 'late moderns': we instinctively regard it as the consolation of the solitary self.) He doesn't like it and he doesn't trust it because he sees it as a way, perhaps *the* way, in which God's truth becomes entangled in the products of the human psyche and thereby becomes distorted. It is an insight echoed by the modern psychoanalyst/philosopher, Julia Kristeva, who sees the Creed as a transcription of deep psychological structures: 'As an analyst, I find that the Credo embodies the basic fantasies that I encounter every day in the psychic lives of my patients'.<sup>4</sup> Not precisely the same point as Barth, but her remark points to an important correlation or isomorphism between the structure of the psyche and the structure of Christian religion.

It is also significant that Barth accuses Sacred Heart devotion of offering 'a generally illuminating access to Jesus Christ': he thinks it too open, too credible, too *human* in its articulation to have properly divine boundaries round it. The rat-runs of the unredeemed psyche are too intrusive in this devotion to allow divine truth to be properly expressed.

The general point is that if theology amplifies and expands its interpretative schemes too confidently, if it lets symbols and images proliferate, if it creates symbolic resonances and gives too much license to the cataphatic way of metaphor and positive attribution, then the mystery of God is colonised by our human categories and Augustine's regulative maxim is violated: *si comprehendis, non est Deus*. Say too much, express too much, imagine too much, visualise too much and you end up worshipping not God who is *semper maior et dissimilis* but the god whom the psyche projects as the object which it wants to venerate.

In Feuerbach's incisive diagnosis, to which Barth was always attentive, all speech about God and Christ will then be simply an unwarranted transcription of the aspirations of our nature into God. And the idolatry that arises when our feeling for God is twinned too closely with our human imagination will be rife, unless – and this is Barth's central point -- it is subverted by nothing less than the otherness, the strangeness, of God in his revelation.<sup>5</sup> Hence Barth's insistence that proper access to Christ is menaced by the cataphatic religious imagination in Sacred Heart devotion.

He sees it as an intrusive projection of human religiosity into the divine economy because, presumably, it is no more than the all-too-human symbol of the wounded healer, the archetype of plangent, rejected, suffering love. It speaks of something in us, and not of the actuality of God; it fosters and indulges the wrong response to Christ: that is why he attacks it so vehemently. Remember that for him, what God does in Christ must be radically discontinuous with the categories of the human imagination: Christianity, after all, is not a religion among others, but is *God's refutation of religion*. Barth's Christianity leaves no space for human religiosity.

If this discussion is correct, then Sacred Heart devotion is a test-case for the value of the religious imagination in relation to God. This large theme cannot be addressed at length here, but it cannot be totally ignored. I would agree with Barth that devotions are pre-eminently human forms of religion that work by drawing upon resources of imagination and feeling, dramatisation and enactment, ritual and repetition, symbol and image, archetype and response; devotions are humanly effective precisely because they ignite sparks embedded in our religiosity. (Unless this happens, it is hard to see how there can be a proper inculturation of the divine Word in the realm of the *humanum*.)

But unlike Barth, I do not see that these devotional forms of religion are therefore obstructive and falsifying in what they say about God and Christ. There is no reason to judge that the symbols in

which the human heart expresses its religious longings stand in radical opposition to God's Word. The symbolic themes in a devotion like that of the Sacred Heart can proceed from and affect the deep *sehnsucht* in our nature and, at the same time, be authentic in what they express of God.<sup>6</sup> What God gives fulfils what we want, and therefore what emerges from God (the Word) is not foreign to deepest longings that emerge from the human heart in religious form.

Where Barth treats the Incarnation as a divine *caesura* that cuts through and negates the forms of our natural religiosity, latent in Catholic devotional piety is another approach that sees the Incarnation as a strangely natural expression of God's closeness. The world, after all, is created in the Word (Jn 1.3) and so the presence of the Incarnate Word does not run counter to the character of the world. The sacred space created by the Incarnate Word is homely in the atmosphere it makes: the Word is at home among us, and we are at home in the sheltering that the Word makes (the Church). This religious instinct nourishes a sensibility in which the things of the world can act as sacramental mediations of the Word. (Importantly, Sacraments are always accompanied by sacramentals. It is only a highly sacramental Church that fosters devotions.)

What I like about devotional practices, and, I surmise, what Barth detested about them, is how intimate and natural they are to those who practise them. I see in them little sense of Rudolf Otto's (German Protestant) description of the experience of the divine as an awesome encounter with the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. By contrast, the Catholic tradition seems to feel so much at home with the presence of the Word among us that it builds cribs to celebrate his birth, paints crucifixes to remember his death and explicitly venerates images of his saints; it is so struck by redemptive love – that, after all, is what the Sacred Heart devotion represents – that its spontaneous practice is to light candles before a statue of the Sacred Heart as a sign that Christ's light is received by us. This intimate sense of being 'at home' in the visible and saving presence of the Word always accompanies the practice of devotions in Catholic popular culture. And this sensibility, available to all whatever their level of education, flows from a different reading of the Incarnation from Barth's dialectical interpretation of it.<sup>7</sup>

While recognising the intimate, natural and homely quality of devotion to the Sacred Heart, one should not lose sight of its dramatic power, situating us imaginatively, but no less really, in God's drama of salvation. The devotion has an extended *dramatic* quality which demands engagement rather than observation. This is important because we will not be able to recover a first-order engagement with the devotion unless we learn how to engage with it again dramatically, and unless we see that the drama is designed to set us on a path of meditative investigation on where we now stand (outside Christ among those who resist him) and where we might stand (as reconciled sinners incorporated into his Body).

In the form in which the devotion comes to us, it is shaped by the expressive fusion of emotion and thought that is the Baroque style of post-Tridentine Catholicism. We are learning to respond aesthetically to the Baroque, without regarding it as a barbaric decline from the harmony of the early Renaissance, but there is still discomfort in responding to the Baroque style of religion. That style, characterised by a concern for interior dispositions, theatrical dramatisation, dramatic and rhetorical amplification, emotional and visual explicitness and affective power, is the major cultural form that Catholic tradition adopts after Trent from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards, all the way through to the threshold of Vatican II. Its influence is felt not only in the works of high culture, but also in the style of popular religion: there is a direct line, albeit at times an attenuation, from Guido Reni's aesthetic to prints of the Sacred Heart in Irish homes. Consider the text of Christ's best known allocution to St Margaret Mary Alacoque:

Behold this heart which has so loved human beings that it has spared nothing, even to exhausting and consuming itself, in order to give them proof of its love, and in return I receive from the greater number nothing but ingratitude, contempt, irreverence, sacrilege and coldness in the sacrament of my love.

Without too much alteration, this could be the text of an aria in a Baroque oratorio of the period, such as Antonio Caldara's oratorio, *Maddalena ai piedi di Cristo*,<sup>8</sup> in which Divine Love and Sensual Love battle for the soul of Mary Magdalene. (It should not surprise us that Baroque devotion and Baroque art-form should be so aligned because both are about how to *feel* in the face of what is real.) In the devotion, we are to be so shocked by the truth of the drama of Christ's love that we move from being on the side of those who reject him to being drawn into enduring with him the sin of the world as an extension of his loving service of sinners. (This is surely how to understand the theme of reparation in the devotion.) Let me outline some of the dramatic features that underpin Sacred Heart devotion:

- The plot (*mythos*) of the devotion is essentially dramatic in structure, full of movements and tensions. I am tempted to use the word 'kinetic' to indicate the to-and-fro quality that arises in the involvement it prompts. The drama is that of Everyman, finding that the more we resist God's love in Christ, the more we are drawn deeper into Christ's love for those who recoil from him. Like a web that entangles us, Christ's love for us only ensnares us the more we struggle against it. The devotion makes sense only if we feel the pulse of the drama of divine love which, spurned by us, presses us even more to respond. The counter-sign of refusal and resistance against which the devotion is set is central to its structure. It delivers the paradox, the divine *koan*, that our sins make us more worthy of the love of the one who declares himself in Christ to be the God of sinners. Tears, when we are confronted with divine love, are the natural human response to grace.
- Within this drama, the heart of Christ has a double signification: in its being pierced, it represents what sinners do to the divine Son. Longinus, traditionally the figure who administers the spear to the side of Christ and who afterwards becomes a Christian, represents all who, by their rejection of Christ, bring him to death on the Cross. The pierced heart is the symbol of the shattering of Christ's body in our world. But the heart from which blood and water flow also represents the source of the mercy and healing that come to those who do this to him. Killing the Saviour only causes grace to flow; resistance is taken seriously and is allowed to take place, but, far from being destructive, it only brings greater love upon us.
- We are asked to ponder the paradox that Longinus, when he becomes a Christian, has to live with the knowledge that the act by which he pierces the side of Christ is the very act which brings him forgiveness. Longinus, the archetypal sinner at the foot of the Cross, is a more satisfactory image of Christian discipleship than the Lutheran simultaneity of being *simul justus et peccator*: for Longinus, sin is in the past, but that horrendous sin alters everything in the present time of grace. Longinus is every sinner who wishes Christ to be removed from his/her life, but who finds they are inescapably caught in Christ's love.
- The symbol of the heart in the devotion is polyvalent: as well as being the natural symbol of human love – God's love is channeled through the human love of Christ for us – the Bible invites us to consider Christ's heart as the source of what comes to humanity in the end-time. The Biblical network of meanings attached to Christ's heart depends upon our seeing the body of Christ as the Temple, the dwelling place of God, the locus of reconciliation between Jew and Gentile (Eph 2.15-16). From the heart of that devastated body/Temple will come the living waters which Ezechiel sees flowing from the rock beneath the Temple (Ez 47.1; cf. Jn 19.34; 7.38-9) and which Zechariah predicts will flow from Jerusalem as strongly in summer as in winter (Zech 14.8). 'On that day a fountain shall be opened for the house of David and

the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and impurity' (Zech 13.1). The heart of Christ is the source of the living waters that well up in the final dwelling place of God, the body/Temple that is Christ, and what flows from Christ's heart will cleanse all sin. It is the heart of flesh that will be set within the body of responsive humanity (Ezech 36.26).

These remarks only outline some of what comes to expression in an engagement with the devotion. My final comments return to a phrase which, in Barth's hands, is used negatively: Sacred Heart devotion, he said, is 'blatantly a matter of finding a generally illuminating access to Jesus Christ'. Indeed so, Professor Barth, that is the point. It is no accident that in the late 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries the devotion was promulgated against a background of Augustinian uncertainty about the scope of salvation. Jansenism, that tragic, quasi-Calvinist characterisation of the human condition as marked by a triple alienation – from God, the world and the self – raised again the possibility that only a limited number of souls would receive the benefits of Christ's redemption. The devotion countered this by a strong assertion of the universal scope of Christ's love, especially for those who reject him. The universally accessible categories of the devotion – its symbols, archetypes, drama and images, all grounded in human religiosity – simply mirror the theological core of the devotion, namely, that *all* have access to Christ who sacrifices himself for those who reject him. The open quality of the devotion – it is always an invitation – is a mirror of the open love of Christ.

Moreover, this was an age which saw the emergence of a secularised godlessness in which indifference and a resistance to all things religious emerged as a strong tone in European life. Sacred Heart devotion registers this shift within the structure of the drama it presents – it is always a resistant sinner who stands before Christ – and in response to culturally shaped godlessness, offers an image of the pierced heart of Christ who saves the world by enduring the world's rejection. 'You may think yourself out of Christian faith,' the devotion seems to be saying, 'but you cannot think yourself out of Christ's love for you because the more you reject him, the more you are loved by him. In his death, he has already borne the wounds of human brutality, turning those wounds into channels of forgiveness.' It is not clear to me that there is a better and more authentically Christian response to secularised godlessness than what comes to expression in the drama and imagery of this devotion. Far from diverting us away from the Incarnate Son, as Barth feared, it surely leads us into a personal involvement with the drama of the pierced and risen Saviour. A popular devotion of this penetrative depth may be treasured if we can learn again how to approach it.

---

<sup>1</sup> K.Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, (T.&T.Clark, 1978), 136.

<sup>2</sup> *Op.cit.*, 137-8.

<sup>3</sup> *Op.cit.*, 138.

<sup>4</sup> Julia Kristeva, *In the Beginning was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith* (Columbia University Press, 1987), 40.

<sup>5</sup> The serious point here, going back to the ancient tension between the *via negativa* and the *via positiva*, surfaces in Schoenberg's opera *Moses und Aron* in the conflict between Moses and Aaron at Mount Sinai. Aaron gives eloquent expression in music and imagery to what is communicated at Sinai, finding words and poetic symbols by which to make God present to his people. Moses, by contrast, does not sing; addressing God as 'omnipresent, invisible and inconceivable', beyond all symbolic representation. While Aaron sings, Moses cries out, 'No image can give you an image of the unimaginable'. See George Steiner's discussion in *George Steiner: A Reader* (Penguin, 1984), 240-2.

---

<sup>6</sup> Is there a more erotic expression of religious longing than François Couperin gives in his *Leçons de Ténèbres*?

<sup>7</sup> The theological principle behind Baroque aesthetics is that things in their conflictual difference may be related artistically and harmoniously because they all stand in God's creative act. Hence Bach's theological fascination with counterpoint and dissonance, Bernini's fusion of divine and creaturely energy and the dramatic *chiaroscuro* – light in duel with darkness -- in which Caravaggio sets his scenes.

<sup>8</sup> Caldara's oratorio is superbly performed by Schola Cantorum, dir. René Jacobs, on *Harmonia Mundi*.