

## The Heart of the Sacred Body

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When I was writing this article, I used a computer in College and a computer at home, transferring material between them on a disc. Whenever I inserted the disc with new material on it, the computer would ask, 'Do you want to replace the existing Sacred Heart?' Although I had to say yes to save the new version of the article, if this is a general question about the devotion, the answer is no: the existing Sacred Heart has more to commend it than we realise and certainly doesn't need replacing.<sup>1</sup>

Many people have difficulties responding to the visual image of the Sacred Heart which feels like religious kitsch. Let me make three points. First of all, the image of the detached Heart is in a Baroque 'emblem' style of representation to which we don't easily respond. The emblem is a concentrated symbol which works emotionally and intellectually, giving rise to an expansive rhetoric of emotionally-charged prayer. The banality of our present ICEL liturgical language barely permits low-key religious sentiment, let alone the effusive intensity of feeling evoked by the Sacred Heart devotion.

Secondly, the devotion belongs to the symbols of popular religion, and we generally extend a greater tolerance to the popular religion of other cultures than to our own: there is a failure of confidence in the expressive forms of popular religions we inherit because the way in which Vatican II was first received in the 1960s led us to think that *aggiornamento* meant leaving behind a popular religion that was distinctively Catholic in favour of a more clipped and unobjectionable ecumenical style.

I become more and more persuaded by Anthony Archer's thesis in *The Two Churches* that the reception of Vatican II in the 1960s and 1970s was hijacked by a middle-class agenda, to the destruction of a symbolic and expressive working-class Catholic life in these islands. Benediction, public Rosary, Stations of the Cross, Litanies, formal extra-liturgical prayer, abstinence from meat, a range of devotional practices, medals, statues and candles became the pre-history from which Vatican II was said to free us, much as Jesus was (mistakenly) said to free people from the observances of the Torah. The liberty of the post-Vatican II 'gospel' was set against the pre-Vatican II 'law and observances', and everything was to be ordered as a progress to the broad sunlit uplands of good, socially respectable religion. In the process, devotion to the Sacred Heart was marginalised.

Thirdly, our response to it is part of a general embarrassment about the Baroque religious style in which the devotion comes to us. This isn't a trivial point because the Baroque style of religion is the major cultural form that the Catholic tradition adopts after the Council of Trent, and our failure to feel at home with devotion to the Sacred Heart is a symptom of our inability to relate, emotionally and spiritually, to the wonderful creativity of the two centuries following that Council. The growing secular interest in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Century Baroque art and

music contrasts with our present Catholic failure to appreciate the Baroque style of religion and piety. Yet the Baroque mode is a unique fusion of emotion and thought, in which deep aspects of Christian faith are communicated in an accessible, dramatic, stylised and symbolic way.<sup>2</sup>

I suspect that the Sacred Heart devotion can only be recovered *dramatically*. As I'll indicate when I discuss the New Testament sources, one way back to appreciating it is not to shy away from its Baroque features of dynamic movements and tensions, but to accept them and understand it as a spiritual drama of divine offer and human refusal, gift and rejection, persuasive pleading on God's part and evasion on ours. In this respect it can be helpful to see the devotion as similar to a Baroque oratorio, in which the interchanges of the one who loves, and the one who rejects that love, are set dramatically against one another, pressing for resolution.

The drama which the devotion evokes is the drama of Everyman: finding that the more we resist God's love in Christ -- and which of us does not? -- we are simply drawn deeper into Christ's love for those who recoil from him. Christ's love for us -- and it is the love of the divine Son, channelled through the human emotions of Christ, that saves us -- is a silken web that entangles us, struggle though we may. The devotion only makes sense if we can feel the pulse of this drama: divine love, spurned by us yet insistent that we respond.

Theologically, the centre of the devotion is the Incarnate Word's love for all those caught in a sinful world. Rahner's words can be a starting point:

The divine love of the Eternal Word has become incarnate in the human love of Christ, has fashioned itself a place in history and cast itself for an unmistakable role in the sinful world; and thereby it has guaranteed that love, and not righteous anger, is God's first and last message to the world.<sup>3</sup>

The 'unmistakable role' which the Eternal Word plays in a sinful world is what the image of the Sacred Heart represents. As a way of approaching the devotion and its dramatic features, I want to recall a striking phrase from the French Jesuit Michel de Certeau writing in the 1980s: 'Christianity begins with the loss of a body'.<sup>4</sup> This is not only the disappearance of the body of Jesus in the resurrection, but also the early Christian community's loss of membership of the body of Israel defined by physical descent and the body of scribal teachings. And so, right at the very beginning, Christian reflection becomes haunted by the need to recover, or discover, a 'body' in which it finds its identity, and this is what stimulates the mysticism about the threefold body of Christ that lies at the heart of Christian spiritual experience:

- the physical body of Christ, broken on the Cross and raised in the glory of the resurrection
- the mystical body of Christ which is the Church: we are the limbs of the body of Christ (1 Cor 12.12) who animates us as our head.

- the eucharistic body of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament: ‘this,’ says Jesus, taking the Passover bread, ‘is my body’.

Christ’s resurrection, far from signalling its disappearance, is how his body is restored as the body of believers and the eucharistic sign, both of which are *Corpus verum Christi*. It becomes present to the whole of sinful humanity, and so through the Eucharistic life of the Church, I am really in touch with the body of Christ, offered to God for my sins. In this transformation, his body is, as it were, ‘extended’ to become the body of sinful and redeemed humanity; sinners are drawn into this bodily centre and healed and restored. ‘When the vessel of his body was shattered in death, Christ was poured out over all the cosmos...’<sup>5</sup> The body of Christ is where we stand as redeemed sinners: we are ‘in’ Christ and that little preposition carries all the meaning that can be read into it.

If de Certeau is right, you can’t have Christianity without being drawn into a mysticism about how *Christ’s body becomes the body of redeemed sinners and the locus of their salvation*, precisely the mystery symbolised by devotion to the Sacred Heart. As I’ll indicate, this is a major theme in the earliest Christian writings, but because today our cultural model of wholeness is therapeutic rather than redemptive, we have a weak sense of role of Christ’s body in effecting human salvation and therefore a feeble sense of what Christ’s pierced Heart signifies.

I’ll trace the theme of the body of Christ, sin and sinners in some crucial New Testament passages. First of all, two passages from Paul: he writes to the Colossians, ‘And you, who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled *in his body of flesh by his death*’ (1.21-2). Here the crucified body of Christ is the place where those alienated by their sins from God become incorporated (*in-bodied*) as an expression of their new union with God. What is their situation now? They are reconciled. Where are they? In Christ’s body.

Similarly, writing to the Ephesians, Paul draws upon the architecture of the Jerusalem Temple to describe the reconciliation that takes place in Christ’s body: the ‘dividing wall of hostility’, he says, that divided Jew from Gentile in this most holy dwelling place of God is broken down by Christ, ‘so that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in *one body through the cross*’ (2.15-6). So while the architecture of the Jerusalem Temple signalled social and religious distinction, by contrast through his death the Body/New Temple of Christ is where a new united body of humanity is created, encompassing Jew and Gentile in transcendent unity.<sup>6</sup>

This union of Jew and Gentile in the crucified body of Christ is a fulfilment of Isaiah’s oracle that in the last days the Gentiles will come in pilgrimage to be united to Israel on the Temple mountain of the Lord (Is 2.1ff), this time understood as Christ’s body which is then the *Temple for the end-time* to which all are drawn by God: it is where all belong and where all find the mercy and peace of God.

You'll see the deep connection of Temple symbolism and Christ's body developed further in the way the Gospel of John interprets the 'Temple riddle' which Jesus offered as the key to his ministry: 'Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up'. In its original meaning, this saying expressed Jesus' conviction that the Jerusalem Temple would be destroyed, but that through him God was building his definitive dwelling place, the fulfilled *ecclesia* of Israel that would be the focus of salvation for the nations. Alone of the Gospel writers, John interprets both parts of this saying as applying to Christ: the Temple that is 'destroyed' is the body of Christ on the Cross and it is 'raised up' in the resurrection (2.21-2).

These rich perspectives on Christ's body as *the devastated and restored Temple, the locus of expiation, healing and reconciliation, the climactic gathering of all into God's mercy*, are the background for Jesus' words in the Fourth Gospel about his heart as the source of living waters. On the Feast of Tabernacles, the autumn harvest feast associated with life-giving rain, Jesus cries out in the Temple: 'If anyone thirst, let him come to me and let him drink who believes in me. As Scripture says, "From his heart shall flow rivers of living water". Now he said this about the Spirit' (7.37-9).<sup>7</sup>

Here again, Biblical prophecies are being evoked which apply to the body of Christ what is said of the Temple: from the heart of Christ will come the living waters which Ezechiel sees flowing from the rock underneath the Temple (Ez 47.1) and which Zechariah predicts will flow from Jerusalem as strongly in summer as in winter (Zech 14.8).<sup>8</sup> Now if the body of Jesus is the Temple from which these rivers will flow, then it is hardly surprising that the Fourth Gospel has a moment of dramatic symbolism, an outward sign of an inner mystery, when Christ's body on the Cross is pierced with a lance: 'at once there came out blood and water'.

Again, the Gospel invites us to must see this moment in the light of a prophecy: when sinners 'look on the one whom they have pierced,' God will pour out a spirit of compassion and supplication on them (12.10; Jn 19.37). '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). So the pierced 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.<sup>9</sup>

The dramatic element in this wonderful network of images can be approached by attending to the soldier, Longinus, who administers the final thrust of the lance which releases the waters of grace. Longinus, according to popular legend, afterwards became a Christian, and so we are asked to ponder the paradox of a Christian believer whose very act of piercing the side of Christ brings him salvation.

Longinus is Everyman, piercing the side of Christ yet saved by the grace flowing from his heart, responsible for Christ's death yet redeemed by that death. The body of Christ bears the wounds of rejection, but the heart that is pierced becomes a stream of mercy and healing to those who do this to him. Longinus represents

all those who, by their rejection of Christ, bring him to death on the cross, but he also represents them in finding that this rejection of Christ only causes the purifying waters from the side of Christ to flow. Wounding the Saviour only causes grace to flow: resistance is taken seriously and allowed to take place, but it only brings greater love upon us. That is the centre of the drama evoked by the Sacred Heart.

If we go back to our earlier theme that *the body of Christ becomes the body of redeemed sinners and the locus of their salvation*, then the drama of the cross, in which Longinus is a key actor, can be seen as a drama in which only by bearing the wounds made by sinners can the body of Christ become the body of sinners. The heart 'has' to be pierced if grace is to flow. The sin-bearing Son loves those who afflict him so much that he becomes the Son who bears sinners, incorporating them into his body, and the role of the heart of Christ in this drama is to represent the attitude of Christ to those who reject him.

I have emphasised the elements of drama in this scene at the foot of the Cross because, as I indicated earlier, the Sacred Heart is pre-eminently a *dramatic* symbol of love in the face of rejection and hostility. You cannot understand what the devotion is about if you ignore the counter-sign of refusal and resistance against which it is set: the Sacred Heart symbolises Christ's love for those who do not love him.<sup>10</sup> This aspect of refusal, resistance or rejection on the part of human beings is central to the structure of the devotion -- it is, as those who foster it know, a devotion which requires and shapes a deep engagement on our part -- and it is a major feature of St Margaret Mary's revelations. In a vision, Christ says to her:

'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 this sacrament of my love.'

How are we to think of this? It is customary to set the devotion, in the form in which it is promulgated after Margaret Mary and Claude de la Colombière, against the background of Jansenism, that resurgence of Augustinian uncertainty about the scope and efficacy of Christ's death which thinks that only a small number will be saved while the mass of humanity goes to a just perdition. The devotion counters this by a strong assertion of the universal scope of Christ's love, especially for those who reject him.

But as Karl Rahner points out, a no less important setting for the emergence of the devotion in recent centuries is a secularised 'godlessness' in which a callous indifference and resistance to all things religious becomes the dominant tone in European life.<sup>11</sup> The devotion emerges in the early modern context of a growing unbelief and hostility to faith in Christ. This should be familiar to us because we are simply further along the same road. And this is surely the context in which we should understand both the 'coldness' towards him which Christ finds and the theme of reparation associated with the devotion.

Pascal tell us that 'Jesus Christ will be in agony until the end of time', and to take that seriously we are not required to pretend that Christ is not now glorified. The reparation linked to the devotion says to us that the state of Christ in bearing the wounds of his mission is not part of the pre-history that is left behind. Redemption, after all, is always in the present tense, never in the past. The sorrowful mysteries of redemption in which Christ's love engages human resistance, ingratitude and sin are a feature of every generation, even ours.

It is, I think, less a matter of making reparation *to* Christ, and more a matter of making reparation *with and in* Christ. The devotion calls sinners to respond to Christ's personal love for them, draws them into the 'work' of Christ's body to which they now belong, and that means enduring with Christ the sin of the world, and, sometimes in the darkness of faith, being drawn into sharing the burden that is laid on Christ by every generation. The work of 'reparation' is first of all Christ's work, and we, as Christ's body of redeemed sinners, live out the drama of its unfolding.

With little difficulty, Paul's statement in Colossians 1.24 teaches us how to understand the work of reparation that becomes part of all those who come, by grace, to love Christ: 'in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body that is the Church'. The 'lack' in this quotation is not a deficiency, as though Christ's sufferings need supplementing by ours, but it signals an extension to the members of his body of his loving service of sinners.

I have been able to indicate only some of the richness of this devotion. It really cannot be ignored by a church that wants to place its religious practice in contact with the mysteries at the heart of our faith. Let me end with Karl Rahner's simple description of what it means: 'Our Lord's love enters into the history of this sinful world and wins its victory by enduring unto death the sin of the world and its own rejection by sinful men. All this outpouring of love is a revelation of his Heart'.<sup>12</sup>

### Devotion to the Sacred Heart

1. Place of Devotions in the life of the Church
2. Popular Visual Images: help of hindrance?
3. Baroque Style of Catholic life after the Council of Trent in 16<sup>th</sup> Century:  
*drama; emotions of warmth, tenderness, fear; directness and expressiveness; all human life held together in tension; Bach on harmony (grace) and discord (sin).*
4. Biblical sources:
  - A/ *'Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.'* Jesus as the builder of God's definitive dwelling place; gathering of men and women to be the Temple of God. In John's Gospel, these words are given a new interpretation: *'He spoke of the temple of his body'* (2.21). *'Christianity begins with the loss of a body'*. It is characterised by the recovery of a body, the Body of Christ in its two fold forms: the Eucharistic Body and the Body of the Church. The body of humanity becomes the body of Christ who incorporates sinners into himself. Christ's body is the Temple for the end-time to which all are called by God: it is where all belong and where all find the mercy and peace of God.
 

B/ In the Temple Jesus had proclaimed: *'If anyone thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, let him come to me, and let him who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, "Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water"'*. Now he said this about the Spirit... (John 7:37). The Holy Spirit flows from the heart of Christ.

C/ When the side of Christ is pierced with a lance, blood and water flow out (John 19.34). As well as signalling the Eucharistic blood of the covenant and the waters of Baptism, this needs to be read in the light of some passages from the Old Testament. The streams of living water flow from Christ as from the Temple, prophesied by Ezechiel: living water will flow from the temple (Ez 17.1). (*'Sweet Heart of Jesus, fount of love and mercy..'*) Zechariah prophesies that living waters will flow out from Jerusalem as strongly in summer as in winter. The Body of Christ is the Temple from which living-giving waters will flow. Christians read other texts from Zechariah in the same way: *'And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of compassion and supplication, so that, when they look on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him... (Zech 12.10) 'On that day there shall be a fountain opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness' (13.1)*

D/ Longinus is the soldier who pierces the side of Christ with a lance. Tradition says that he afterwards became a Christian who lives with the knowledge that his piercing the side of Christ brings him salvation. Longinus represents all those who by their rejection of Christ bring him to death on the cross, but he also represents them in finding that this rejection of Christ only causes the purifying waters to flow from the side of Christ.
5. The image of the Sacred Heart represents the attitude of Christ to those who first of all reject him and then become part of him. Christ is the sin-bearing Son who becomes the place of reconciliation for all sinners because he incorporates them into his Body. Christ's words to St Margaret Mary:

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 this sacrament of my love.

St Margaret Mary writes: 'It seems to me that our Lord's earnest desire to have his Sacred Heart honoured in a special way is directed toward renewing the effects of redemption in our souls. For the Sacred Heart is an inexhaustible fountain and its sole desire is to pour itself out into the hearts of the humble so as to free them and prepare them to lead lives according to his good pleasure. From this divine mercy three streams flow endlessly. The first is the stream of mercy for sinners; it pours into their hearts sentiments of contrition and repentance. The second is the stream of charity which helps all in need and especially aids those seeking perfection to find the means of surmounting their difficulties. From the third stream flow love and light for the benefit of his friends who have attained perfection; these he wishes to unite to himself so that they may share his knowledge and commandments and, in their individual ways, devote themselves wholly to advancing his glory.'

6. The Image represents the universal love of Christ for those who reject him. In 17<sup>th</sup> Century, the devotion challenges Jansenism which suggested that only a small number will be saved by Christ's death, leaving the majority of humanity in perdition. (Crucifixes with narrow arms) It also emerges in the context of a growing secularised 'godlessness' in which indifference and resistance to all things religious becomes the dominant tone.
7. Reparation: the devotion calls sinners to respond to Christ's personal love for them, draws them into the 'work' of Christ's body to which they now belong, and that means enduring with Christ the sin of the world, and, sometimes in the darkness of faith, being drawn into sharing the burden that is laid on Christ by every generation. The work of reparation is first of all Christ's work, and we, as Christ's body of redeemed sinners, live out the drama of its unfolding.
8. 'It is in the Heart of Christ that the human heart learns to know the true and unique meaning of its life and destiny; it is in the Heart of Christ that the human heart receives its capacity to love. It is the love of Christ which makes a person worthy of being loved. Created in the image and likeness of God, the human person has received a heart eager for love and capable of loving. The love of the Redeemer, which heals it from the wound of sin, elevates to its filial condition.' (Pope John Paul II, Feast of the Sacred Heart, June 22, 1990)
  1. I will give them all the graces necessary for their state of life.
  2. I will give peace in their families.
  3. I will console them in all their troubles.
  4. They shall find in my Heart an assured refuge during life and especially at the hour of death.
  5. I will pour abundant blessings on all their undertakings.
  6. Sinners shall find in my Heart the source and infinite ocean of mercy.
  7. Tepid souls shall become fervent.

8. Fervent souls shall speedily rise to great perfection.
9. I will bless the homes in which the image of my Sacred Heart shall be exposed and honoured.
10. I will give to priests the power to touch the most hardened hearts.
11. Those who propagatate this devotion shall have their name written in My Heart, and it shall never be effaced.
12. The all-powerful love of my Heart will grant to all those who shall receive Communion on the First Friday of nine consecutive months the grace of final repentance; they shall not die under my displeasure, nor without receiving their Sacraments; my Heart shall be their assured refuge at that last hour. (Christ's Promises to St Margaret Mary)

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<sup>1</sup> The outstanding work on devotion to the Sacred Heart is still *The Heart of the Saviour*, ed. J. Stierli (Herder & Herder, 1957), with excellent articles by Hugo and Karl Rahner among others. See also Annice Callahan, *Karl Rahner's Spirituality of the Pierced Heart: A Reinterpretation of Devotion to the Sacred Heart* (University of America Press, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> A musical equivalent of the emotions and piety evoked in Sacred Heart devotion is found in *extases baroques*, Maria Christina Kiehr's CD of 17<sup>th</sup> Century vocal music.

<sup>3</sup> K. Rahner, 'Some Theses on the Theology of the Devotion' in *Heart of the Saviour*, ed. J. Stierli, (Herder & Herder, 1958), 147.

<sup>4</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable, Vol I: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (University of Chicago Press, 1992), 81.

<sup>5</sup> K. Rahner, *On the Theology of Death* (Herder & Herder, 1969), 66.

<sup>6</sup> In a related text, the body of the crucified Christ is seen by Paul as the 'mercy seat' of final expiation of sins which God displays (Rom 3.25). Paul is quoting an earlier Jerusalem tradition which sees Christ's death on Golgotha as the climactic fulfilment of the rite on the Day of Atonement when the High Priest sprinkles blood on the mercy seat (*hilasterion*) of God. If so, then the theme of Christ as High Priest and atoning victim, which Hebrews will develop, goes back to the very earliest interpretation of his death. Cf., Ben F. Meyer, *The Early Christians: Their World Mission and Self-Discovery* (Michael Glazier, 1986), 78ff.

<sup>7</sup> Raymond Brown, *The Gospel of John Vol I* (The Anchor Bible, 1971), 320f). This translation of the important verse, which sees the heart of Christ as the source of the living waters, is to be preferred to the NRSV translation which thinks of the heart of the believer as the source. The Jerusalem Bible gets it right.

<sup>8</sup> An additional piece of symbolism is given by Paul when he says that the rock from which Moses draws forth water in the desert 'was Christ' (Num 20.10; I Cor 10.4).

<sup>9</sup> It is striking that several of the epithets in the *Litany of the Sacred Heart* draw upon the image of Christ's body as the Temple: Holy Temple of God, Tabernacle of the Most High, House of God and Gate of Heaven, Fountain of Life and Holiness. Like the *Litany of Loreto*, it is profoundly Biblical.

<sup>10</sup> If we are looking for deeper reasons than the irresponsibility of the 60s and 70s for the decline of the devotion in recent years, then a major factor is a weakening of our sense of needing redemption and of needing Christ.

<sup>11</sup> 'The religious values of Christianity are being progressively eliminated from modern life... Every man must live, irrespectively of whether he decides for or against Christianity, in a situation marked by the outward, and therefore also inward "absence of God", a situation which corresponds to Golgotha and Gethsemane in the life of Jesus..' K. Rahner, 'Some Theses', 141.

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<sup>12</sup> K.Rahner, 'Some Theses', 146-7.