

THE SACRED HEART OF JESUS

& THE 250TH ANNIVERSARY OF INDEPENDENCE

On Thursday, 11th June, the Bishops of the United States, to mark the 250th anniversary of Independence, will consecrate the nation to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. We might be curious as to why the Bishops are doing this, so let us explore the meaning of the devotion to the Sacred Heart and the importance of this consecration. We can begin by recalling that by tradition June is the month dedicated to the “Sacred Heart of Jesus.” Furthermore, many churches have a prominent statue of the Sacred Heart and many homes have either a statue or a picture of the Sacred Heart in them. We probably know all this, but we might still be puzzled or unsure about this devotion, or think that it might be a bit outdated, or perhaps we might just like to know more.

Devotions to the Sacred Heart became more prominent after the visions of Saint Margaret Mary Alacoque, a saint who lived in France in the late seventeenth century. Very quickly, devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus became at the very heart (pun intended!) of Catholic life. In his encyclical letter, *Dilexit Nos* (on the Sacred Heart of Jesus), Pope Francis wrote about a world that has become "heartless" and indifferent to greed and war, and a Catholic Church in need of revitalizing its missionary joy, need to open themselves up to Christ's infinite love. By contemplating Jesus' Sacred Heart, the faithful can be filled with the living water that can heal the hurt we have caused, strengthen our ability to love and serve others, and inspire us to journey together toward a just, solidary and fraternal world. The encyclical includes numerous reflections from the Bible, previous magisterial texts and the writings of saints and his fellow Jesuits, to re-propose to the whole church the centuries-old devotion. In fact, since 1899, there have been four papal encyclicals and numerous papal texts dedicated to the Sacred Heart: a symbol of Jesus' infinite love, which moves the faithful to love one another.

Pope Francis noted that in the deepest fiber of our being, we were made to love and to be loved. However, when we witness the outbreak of new wars or just ongoing and petty power struggles, we may be tempted to conclude that our world is losing its heart. Therefore, the most decisive question we can ask is, “Do I have a heart?”

With the Pope Francis’s reflections in mind, we can see that there is an important symbolism at play in this devotion to the Sacred Heart. When we speak of the heart as Catholic Christians, we do not just mean the vital and amazing organ that pumps blood around our bodies. Rather, the heart is understood to be at the very center of what motivates us and it is the seat of our love for God and for others. This also makes sense when we think about many phrases that we use about people: warm-hearted, cold-hearted, broken-hearted, big-hearted, open-hearted etc. These phrases are not really talking about that amazing muscle, the physical human heart! Instead, they describe or capture the essence of a person.

We can easily see the root of this particular understanding of the heart in the Bible, where the word *heart* is used hundreds of times, usually as a symbol of the very soul of a person. The “heart” is

literally what makes them tick, or as we might say, going to the very heart of things. The Sacred Heart of Jesus therefore reminds us of His great love for us, and of His desire to fill our hearts with His love. Perhaps we can also reflect that this devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus questions us and challenges us, particularly about where my heart really is. In other words, what really motivates me or makes me tick, and where do I put all my energies in life? In this way, the challenge is about our *spiritual heart*: How would we describe it from that list above? We should also ask these questions, not only as individuals, but also as a nation.

The Sacred Heart is deeply connected with *the* gift of love pouring out from the heart of Jesus, namely the Eucharist. The Eucharist is often called “the sacrament of love” since it is a real presence of Jesus’s love for us and a challenge for us to love another. Do I receive the Eucharist with an open and clean heart? Do I then live the love of Jesus that I have received as I leave Mass, especially as life crowds in? A number of parishes also have “Eucharistic Adoration”, where we can spend time in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. It is a wonderful way of extending the loving encounter with our Lord that we experience and receive during the celebration of the Mass. We might say that in Adoration, the Lord strengthens and expands our heart.

In these reflections about the heart, we can easily understand why the Bishops in the United States have chosen to consecrate our nation to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, as we celebrate the 250th anniversary of independence. We might say that the sacred Heart is at the very heart of our mission and purpose as a nation! The love of God, shown in the Sacred Heart of Jesus, motivates and makes possible all that we do and hope to achieve, especially in our love and service of others

As we continue our journey through these summer months, perhaps our Lord asks two things of us as individuals, families and, of course, as a nation. First, he asks us to open our hearts to His heart; that is to His immense love. Let us not be hardhearted or indifferent to Jesus’ great love for each of us. Secondly, he asks us to look into our hearts and to see what is there and then, with His help, to renew and to strengthen our heart: that is to create a pure heart within us. In all this, we will receive many gifts that we need in our often busy lives that can tug at our heart this way and that. Finally, and by no means least, we can receive that special gift of the risen Christ, the gift of a tranquility of heart. This is a gift that many of us need in our busy and sometimes fragmented lives. It is a wonderful gift indeed!

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