

Solemnity of the Sacred Heart 92018)
(Hos 11:1,3-4,8-9; Eph 3:8-12,14-19; John 19:31-37)

When I pray the first sorrowful mystery of the rosary, my thoughts begin where the action began that evening, at the Last Supper. There Jesus says to the twelve, "I have greatly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer." One can imagine Him looking around the table at the faces of those He had chosen, instructed for three years, and in His heart loved them dearly. One needn't be a sentimentalist to imagine the stab of pain as He went on to declare, "One of you will betray me." And a more painful stab if He heard Judas in the garden say to those who came to apprehend Him, "The one I kiss is he; arrest him and lead him away carefully." Jesus' reproach was mild, "Judas, do you betray the Son of Man with a kiss?"

By what right do we look into the sentiments of Jesus' heart? Already in the OT, God had revealed the love and the pain of His heart. Early in Genesis, at the time of the flood, we read that because of the great wickedness of human beings on earth, "his heart was grieved" (Gen 6:5).

But surely today's first reading gives us the ultimate example of this. As happens in the lectionary, our reading is truncated and much of its force is lost. In the part omitted God declares an end to His patience and forbearance for Israel's sins: Basta! He has had enough! they shall be exiled to Egypt and Assyria, the sword shall devour them from one end to the other; there is a limit to His mercy: and though in unison they cry out to him, God

will not raise them up! But then we have the picture of God standing bereft of His children and crying, "How could I give you up, O Ephraim, or deliver you up, O Judah?" and THEN the words from today's reading, "My heart is overwhelmed, my pity is stirred." The philosophers tell us that God is impassible, not subject to emotions. But this is not the God of the Bible. I quote Pascal, as I did on Trinity Sunday: "our God is not the god of the philosophers; He is the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our fathers." Very anthropomorphic, you might say, but how much more anthropomorphic can you get than the Incarnation, and the very love of God not only symbolized but literally contained in a human heart of flesh?

By what right do we probe the inner sentiments of the heart of Jesus? They are revealed to us in the NT. We are told that when Jesus passed through Jericho, two blind men cried out, "Son of David, have pity on us!" And Jesus, moved with pity, touched their eyes and restored their sight (Matt 20:29-34). In another place we are told, "At the sight of the crowds, his heart was moved with pity for them because they were troubled and abandoned, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matt 9:36). And in another place, "When he disembarked and saw the vast crowd, his heart was moved with pity for them, and he cured their sick" (Matt 14:14). And we could go on and on.

By what right do we look into the sentiments of Jesus' heart? Jesus Himself has told to us through a series of saints privileged by revelations from Him. We think

especially of St. Mechtilde of Helfta (+1298), St. Gertrude the Great (+1302), both Benedictines, and St. Margaret Mary Alacoque (+1690) of the Visitation. These three and others were recipients of revelations by Jesus intended to promote devotion to His Sacred Heart, depicted to them as His physical heart afire with love for humankind. As a result of these revelations and the devotion they enkindled, in 1856 Pius IX declared it a feast for the whole Church, and in 1928 Pius XI made it a solemnity. By revelation to St. Margaret Mary Alacoque the practice of the Nine First Fridays was instituted, the goal of which is reparation for all the sinfulness and ingratitude. Jesus had complained, "Behold the Heart that has so loved men.... Instead of gratitude I receive from the great majority sin and ingratitude."

St. Gertrude is said to have been an artist (among many other accomplishments); if she had left us a painting, I'm sure it would have been a more tasteful presentation than what often passes for Catholic art, so smarmy that it turns many away from the beautiful devotion desired and revealed by Jesus. Today's gospel does not mention Jesus' heart, but speaks rather of the piercing of His side; however, the very description of Him hanging abandoned on the cross, having died so cruel a death for our sins, is itself a testimonial to the love of His heart. The blood and water from His side are most frequently interpreted as symbolizing the sacraments of Eucharist and baptism. The Eucharist is a sign of Jesus' desire to be with us, and we with Him. St. Paul in the second reading does not speak

expressly of Jesus' heart, but he does speak of "the unfathomable riches of Christ" and prays that we may be able "to grasp fully ... the breadth and length and height and depth of Christ's love ... which surpasses all knowledge." The first reading does speak of the heart of God, as we have seen.

"Heart" is a very important term in Scripture; it occurs over 500 times. Its frequency reveals its importance, but it also indicates that we are on a two-way street, just as with the Eucharist. That is, Jesus reveals the love of His heart, but it is in the hope of receiving the love of our hearts in return. It is in Proverbs that we find, "My son, give me your heart and let your eyes keep to my ways." All this indicates, just as with the Eucharist, a two-way street.

This mutuality of love is expressed beautifully in one of the canticles we use in the office:

The favors of the LORD I will recall,
the glorious deeds of the LORD,
Because of all he has done for us;
for he is good to the house of Israel,
He has favored us according to his mercy
and his great kindness.

[8] He said: They are indeed my people,
children who are not disloyal;
So he became their savior
[9] in their every affliction.

It was not a messenger or an angel,
but he himself who saved them.
Because of his love and pity

he redeemed them himself,
Lifting them and carrying them
all the days of old (Isa 63:7⁹).

In the Eucharist Jesus wants to be with us, and wants us to be with Him; so Jesus reveals the love of His heart, but in the hope of receiving the love of our hearts in return. We should offer our heart to Him to have for Himself, as His own realm; we should ask Him to eject from it all that is displeasing to Him, to defend it from all that is inimical to Him, to ask Him to enlarge it so we can love Him as He loves us. To fully attain to such love may seem impossible for us, but it is what we should strive for. We're not likely to be carried away with the sentimentality that satisfies so many; instead, we will remember that love of God is expressed in love of others. At every Mass we might look around at those with us, with hearts full of love, we think, "I have greatly desired to celebrate this Pascal meal with you."