



THEOLOGICAL DIMENSION OF THE HEART

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JUBILEE YEAR OF THE HEART OF JESUS
October 20, 2021-2022

The symbol of the heart has long attracted attention within literature studies in general, and among Scripture and theology studies in particular. This demonstrates both the richness and appeal of the subject. In the world of theology, its sources include the biblical, spiritual, and mystical, with contributors on the subject including Saint Augustine, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, and Saint Gertrude the Great, just to name a few.

The first inspiration for this theology is found in Holy Scripture, the original source of any subsequent reflection upon it. For us, celebrating a Jubilee Year of the Feast of Jesus' Heart, our focus will be particularly centered on Saint John Eudes' reflection and the theological insights he developed, or at least laid groundwork for. The Feast itself was first celebrated at his initiative, using the liturgical texts he composed and culminating in what he called the "Mass of Fire."

Saint John Eudes' reflection on a theology of the heart developed throughout his life. At a certain point, it became the central illuminating symbol for his thought, and the one great, fundamental reality in his eyes. That reality might be summarized in this way: the Heart of Jesus and Mary make up one heart. This includes unity of inclinations, feelings, intentions, and interior dispositions (OC VI, 100). The effect of this "discovery" could be seen as a theological "big bang," opening wide to new vistas, and a new hermeneutical horizon for interpreting reality.

The words around this key concept came not from the saint himself, but clearly from Sacred Scripture. The absolute centrality of God's love in human existence is foundational to his writings from the very beginning. Our response to this free and merciful graciousness of the Lord toward humanity must, then, be nothing other than love. Love is thus the central hub of the saint's teaching. A point of clarification: Saint John Eudes prefers to use "mercy" to name God's attitude toward creation, and "love" to name our response to that grace.

Layering in the language of "heart" as the great sign of love is an important milestone in this theology's development. In the heart, Saint John Eudes situates God's movement toward humanity, our response to God, and our love toward fellow humans, all deeply affected by a dynamic movement generated by God which the saint prefers to call "charity." These preferences notwithstanding, neither we nor the saint stand much on the necessity for strict distinction between these terms, since all the included relationships (love, charity, mercy) can unequivocally be encompassed by the term "love." This unity of concept, this theology of love, is the basis for what can be called a theology of the heart.

Especially in the saint's fully matured articulation of his thought, the foundational hub of love/heart is of utmost importance. It become the lens through which other areas of theology are interpreted, such as Christology, Mariology, and others.



Saint John Eudes had extensive knowledge of Sacred Scripture, from the Latin Vulgate edition. His writings frequently refer explicitly or indirectly to Scriptural texts, thus ensuring fidelity to the thought expressed in the sacred writing. From Scripture, then, he takes nine distinct uses of the word "heart" to elaborate on the core of his theological insight (Admirable Heart p. 8-12, or OC VIII 425-428).

From these nine uses, explained originally in reference to the Heart of Mary), a clear anthropology may be inferred which goes on to inform his other areas of theology, such as Christology or Mariology among others. Its threads can be picked up throughout his writings and elaborated from the original into the following definable trends.

The theme of the three hearts, perhaps one of his most outstanding contributions to theology, both in Mariology and Christology. Three hearts that are but one heart: the human heart, the spiritual heart and the divine heart (OC VII 428; 555). Although the author does not directly explain it, these same theological lines apply not only to Mary, but also to every baptized Christian. Each Christian's physical, psychological, and spiritual reality can also be considered as one heart united to the great reality of the Heart of Jesus.

The concept of the Heart or, to put it in other terms now elaborated: the Heart of Jesus, becomes the source material from which the rest is structured and understood. The

theological contribution is not limited to just the doctrine on the Heart of Jesus, or on the Heart of Mary, or on the unity of these two hearts in one. It is, rather, the foundation of his reflection in the light of faith on many other realities which, in light of this "discovery," show new facets and invite us to examine them anew, now through the lens of Jesus' heart.

From the above statement, other implications may spark personal reflection, not least of which would be about its impact on our individual existences, our communal existence. Its core is a principle of unity, first across human existence in general, and in a special way to the baptized Christian. The unity extends in two inseparable dimensions. Indeed, baptism begins an irreversible union with the Trinity, since through its waters we are made children of the heavenly Father, part of the body of Jesus Christ and living temples of the Holy Spirit forever. Put in Eudesian terms, we become one heart with each person of the Most Holy Trinity.

At the same time, a dynamic union is also created with each and every other baptized person. It is a familial unity as children of the same Father, a unity through everything human which is what Jesus chose to share with us each, and a union in the active presence of the Holy Spirit. In this way, our individual reality can be seen from a new horizon. Every person we see shares with us a single Heart in the Trinitarian mystery, a "cordial" unity (from the Latin "cor" for heart) among the entire community of baptized, a reality that is carried out in the light of faith.



Another dynamic that arises from this reality of the Heart, from a Eudesian perspective, is the mystery of ecclesial communion, a living echo of the Communion of Saints. This is, perhaps, one of the most innovative points this theological insight reaches. The Church is not simply the sum of myriad hearts belonging to separate believers. Rather, this unity and communion is a mystery wholly unique which Saint John Eudes calls "the Great Heart" (which he frequently alluded to in his oft-used reference to the *corde magno*). This one Great Heart is composed of the seamless union of the Heart of Jesus and the Heart of Mary, together with the union of the hearts of all the saints, all the baptized faithful (OC VI, 262). This could be labeled an Ecclesiology of the Heart, a perspective capable of bearing much fruit.

A pedagogical and andragogical approach logically derives from the doctrine of the Heart. Its influence can be traced in the Eudist Family's personal and community process to "form Jesus" in each of our hearts. Beginning from personal faith, Saint John Eudes' suggested method of forming Jesus is has two fields of action: through the "spirit," that is to frequently think about Jesus' presence in the smallest or largest actions of every day, and through the "heart", that is, through small and frequent prayers of love for Jesus (cf. *Kingdom of Jesus, Exercise of Love for Jesus*, p. 222 and following).

Clearly, forming Jesus in the heart of each Christian is not strictly reduced to the practice of a single proposed method. The

objective is personal transformation, which includes the real acceptance of God's self-revelation, the response of faith, the renunciation of evil, and consciously integrating the following of Jesus to a point where we may live as "another Jesus" on earth. It is accepting to become transformed by the life of grace and by the action of the Holy Spirit, so that, according to the design of God, the human being recovers our original situation from before the Fall, before being damaged by the action of the devil through sin.

In this way, the anthropological scope of union with –and in– the Heart of Jesus becomes a way of a totalizing response to the Revelation of its mystery, which is, deep down, a mystery of love, of gratuity. Humanity cannot claim it as our due because we are sinners, nor do we have the possibility of achieving it by our own strength, reduced to weakness by sin. It is the love of God that comes to us, from the very beginning in the mystery of the Incarnation, filling the littleness of the created human being. Out of love, only out of love, God shows us mercy and grace. The novelty that the Eudesian proposal brings to this line of thought is the generation of a process within humanity, also based on love, responding by forming Jesus in our Great Heart, and becoming another Jesus helping to establish his Kingdom of love in the world.

Another theological dynamic of the Heart of Jesus, about which little is often said, is what could be called "Eudesian cosmology." Cosmology being the extrapolation, here



from the perspective of the Heart of Jesus, of theology onto our understanding of the cosmos, of creation. Within our Eudesian cosmology, the principles of an ecological theology can be found. Indeed, with some frequency we find in the writings of Saint John Eudes, the trilogy "world of nature, world of grace, and world of glory" (OC I, 398). Saint John Eudes is fond of any tripartite thought or triptych of ideas, probably due to the influence of Saint Augustine who, in turn, sought vestigia Trinitatis (traces of the Trinity) in many created realities. It is also possible that the expression as such is common in other contemporary authors.

The fact that we certainly have is the frequency of this expression, which clearly means that Saint John Eudes integrates it, reflects upon it, and makes it his own. It is a holistic view of creation, of the visible and the invisible, which, in turn, projects a theological dimension uniting what is created with what is beyond it. No part of this trilogy can be fully understood without its link to the other two, although each one can be considered separately.

Indeed, the world of nature, which could be identified with the world of physics and matter, has a place in God's heart and a theological reason for its existence. It does not exist by itself or for itself but, in some way, is found encompassed by the theology of the Heart. Nature as such "groans and suffers labor pains... waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body" (Rom 8:22), which is to say that the reason the

world of nature exists is so it may be fulfilled by its transcendence toward the action of God, a God who creates for love.

The *raison d'être* of the world of nature is, therefore, not to exist purely for itself but to exist in openness to the action of God's grace with a very certain ultimate motive: the glory of God, the glory of the Trinity. Such reality gives a transcendent meaning to natural realities, that they find their fullness in the glory of God. Looking with these eyes upon creatures, created things, the whole cosmos, we may ask ourselves a piercing question. What is our responsibility, as human beings, toward a creation belonging to God and existing to bring glory to its creator?

To conclude, let it be said that this brief presentation has only touched upon some theological implications that can radiate from Saint John Eudes' insight regarding the Heart. Our hope has been to provide tantalizing glimpses of the rich tapestry underlying his thought. As encouragement and guidance in reflecting further, you may find it interesting to consider the following two viewpoints, two panoramas for our eyes to scan across.

The first panorama is of the void that exists at this moment in history, in the lack of a holistic vision that can encompass and illuminate our individual existences with love and transcendence. Consider the Heart in Eudesian teaching filling that void. A second panorama is of Christian mission and the implications which derive from it. The



Great Heart, as a way of seeing reality and living it, could provide reflections not only theological but ethical as well. Reflections beneficial for humanity, originating in the Heart of God, calling us all to unity as sharers of the one Great Heart, and called to live out its implications in turn. Implications which could transform our participation in politics, in economics, in social realities, in our very understanding of anthropology and of the spiritual importance of every human being around us.

At first glance, such a proposal might seem utopian, yet it ties to specific forces and trends, needs and aspirations that require

concrete responses in the communities around us. Responses in both small and large ways, responses that can offer an optimistic option for our society which is hurtling vertiginously toward division, towards discrimination against huge swaths of the world's population. Communities thus transformed can become small but powerful nuclei, which are the only beginnings possible for growing a future society.

