

## DOMINICAN DEVOTION TO THE SACRED HEART

James Thuline, O.P.

**F**IDELITY to the mind of the Church has always been one of the hallmarks of the Dominican tradition. Thus when the late Pope Pius XII in his Encyclical *Haurietis Aquas* said: "The Church has always held devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus in such high regard and continues to esteem it so greatly that she strives to have this devotion flourish throughout the world and to promote it in every way,"<sup>1</sup> we are not surprised to find that devotion to the Sacred Heart is an old and glorious tradition found in the Order from its beginnings over seven hundred years ago. We find strong confirmation of this in the very same encyclical in which the Pope singled out the names of those *prior* to the time of St. Margaret Mary Alacoque "who achieved special distinction in establishing and promoting devotion to the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus."<sup>2</sup> Of the eight names listed *three* are members of the Dominican family, a rather large percentage particularly when it is noticed that no other Order or group has more than one representative. It is the intent of this article to examine, though rather briefly, the history of the devotion within the Order placing particular stress on the earlier centuries and on some of the developments in recent centuries.

### THE EARLY CENTURIES

Pere Bainvel, the Jesuit historian of the Sacred Heart devotion, says: "With regard to St. Ignatius, we have no certain historical proof that he had any devotion in the strict meaning of the word, to the Heart of Jesus."<sup>3</sup> Somewhat the same problem confronts anyone seeking similar evidence with regard to St. Dominic. He left us no writings and the canonization process gives no

evidence of explicit devotion to the Sacred Heart. Yet one of the more familiar representations of St. Dominic is that of Fra Angelico depicting Our Holy Father kneeling at the foot of the Cross while the blood from the wounded side of the Saviour trickles down onto his cappa. Whatever be the fundament of this representation, this much is certain, St. Dominic had very obviously a warm and tender affection for the sacred humanity of Christ, and it is but a short step from love for the wounds of Our Saviour to devotion to His Sacred Heart. Traces of this are to be found in the correspondence of St. Dominic's successor, Blessed Jordan of Saxony. So it is in 1223 we find him exhorting Bl. Diana of Andalo:

“. . . in Him (Christ) you will find an abundance of gold. . . . It is the streams flowing from the source, the wounds of the Saviour, which attest the abundance of this red gold of divine love. . . . If then you keep yourself at the right hand of Christ, near the stream which flows from his right side you will be clothed with gold.”<sup>4</sup>

We see then that the first two Generals of the Order, though not precisely defining the nature of the devotion, did give their followers a direction, an example, that was not to be overlooked.

The first and most illustrious Dominican of that period to be captivated by an explicit love for the Sacred Heart, St. Albert, is the first of the three members of the Order cited by the pope in *Haurietis Aquas*. Laying one more claim to his title of the “Great,” he was among the first to propagate the devotion particularly in his writings, which abound in many direct references to the Sacred Heart such as the following:

“The Heart of Our Lord is the golden ark of the Covenant; therein is preserved the manna of grace, which dispenses the Holy Eucharist to us. . . . Love goes forth from a Heart always consumed by it. . . . Through a love which enkindled it like a fire and wholly consumed it for those it loved, the Divine Heart was moved to prepare graces for us.”<sup>5</sup>

Modern writers point out that St. Albert seems to have been the first to indicate the close connection between the Sacred Heart and the Eucharist.

Slightly younger contemporaries of St. Albert, such as Henry of Hallis and Theodoric of Appodia, were doing a great deal to spread the devotion, particularly in their capacity as spiritual directors for some of the more renowned convents such as that of the Cistercian nuns of Helft. In this famous convent dwelled not only the great mystic St. Gertrude (d. 1302) but also St. Mech-

tilde of Hackenborn (d. 1298) and the saintly Mechtilde of Magdeburg (d. 1285). The latter had what is believed to be the first recorded vision of the Sacred Heart (around 1250), which her Dominican confessor ordered her to commit to writing. In the *Libro Specialis Gratiae* of St. Mechtilde, a number of texts clearly indicate the extent to which members of the Order were caught up in the devotion:

“While St. Mechtilde was one time praying for a certain brother of the Order of Preachers the Lord said to her: ‘I have chosen him for Myself. . . . When he preaches, let him have My Heart for a trumpet; when he teaches let him have my Heart for a book.’”

In another place in the same book it is recounted that St. Mechtilde had a certain brother of the Order of Preachers appear to her:

“And she saw a certain stream from the Heart of God flowing in a special manner in the soul of the brother.”

These saintly nuns and their followers whose devotion to the Sacred Heart was well known, bore witness to the fact that the part played by the Order of Preachers in diffusing this veneration in Germany in the 13th and 14th centuries was even greater than their own.<sup>6</sup> When we consider that very shortly thereafter men like Eckhart, John Tauler and Bl. Henry Suso came upon the scene, all of whom history singles out as the leading German mystics of their day and all of whose writings and sermons abound with manifestations of their love for the Sacred Heart, we can very readily see that the testimony of these nuns is not to be taken lightly.

Master Eckhart (d. 1327), renowned theologian and preacher, was the oldest of the three and also taught the other two. Though after his death some of the propositions he had expounded during a lifetime of teaching and preaching were condemned, he had previously repudiated any unorthodox sense in which his teaching might be construed, and had retracted all possible errors in making a complete submission to the teaching of the Church. In treating of the Sacred Heart (none of which doctrine has been questioned) he is similar to St. Albert in pointing out the intimate relationship between the Sacred Heart and the Eucharist, but he is the first to speak of the presence of the Sacred Heart *in* the Sacrament. In one of his Commentaries he speaks in a manner which presages that of St. Margaret Mary some four hundred years later when he refers to the flames of love emanating from the Sacred Heart:

"His heart on the cross was as a fire and furnace from which flame blazed forth on all sides. Thus on the cross He (Christ) was totally consumed by the ardor of His pious love for the whole world."

John Tauler (d. 1361) was perhaps the most famous of the three at that time. Eloquent testimony is given to the soundness of his doctrines by the fact that his works found acceptance and wide usage among men like St. John of the Cross, St. Peter Canisius, Blossius, St. Francis de Sales. His writings provide us with an abundance of texts bearing on the Sacred Heart. For instance in a sermon on the feast of the Assumption:

"Forego all these occasional things, be free of them and let your true being slip into His adorable and loving Heart, into the glorious bridal chamber which He has opened for his own who are willing to give Him their heart."<sup>7</sup>

The other Dominican friar mentioned by the Holy Father in his encyclical was Blessed Henry Suso. Through his spiritual guidance of many souls, his preaching and writings, especially his *Little Book of Eternal Wisdom*, he was an outstanding propagator of this devotion in the 14th century. So well known was this book that in the Middle Ages, when copying of books was at a premium, it was translated by hand more than the *Imitation of Christ* and became "the most widely read spiritual book in Germany in the Middle Ages."<sup>8</sup> Bl. Henry endured many and great spiritual trials but was more than compensated by the reception of many favors from the Sacred Heart. In two places in the *Little Book of Eternal Wisdom*, taken as examples of the clarity of his teaching on this doctrine, we find the following:

"Lord, no magnet ever attracted iron to itself so strongly as the example of your loving sufferings draws all hearts to unite with yours."

"Consider all hearts and see if there was one filled with love as Mine (Christ's) has been. I should wish in place of all the members of My Body to have but one, and that the noblest, the Heart. . . ."

Faced with such clear and abundant testimony from the early centuries of the Order we can readily assent to the judgment of Pere Bainvel that "the whole Dominican Order had early become familiar with the idea of the wounded heart and the symbolism connected with it."<sup>9</sup>

In the years that followed these men of the early centuries, there arose throughout the Order a new wave of piety sparked by the efforts of Bl. Raymond of Capua who had inaugurated a restoration of regular observance. Again during this period there is not found wanting more than adequate testimony that devotion

to the Sacred Heart remained strong in the Order. Such men as the following made no secret of their deep devotion to the Sacred Heart: the noted Swiss preacher John Herold, who frequently exhorted his hearers to: "Behold His Heart opened to love us. . ."; Berthold, the author of the *Horologium Devotionis*, a series of meditations containing frequent allusions to the adorable Heart of Jesus; the zealous writer for reform John Meyer of Tigur who besought his readers to ask the "Sweet Heart of Our Beloved Lord Jesus Christ" to assist them to lead a pious spiritual life; and, of course, the great St. Vincent Ferrer. In a sermon on the Passion he states: ". . . when the lance pierced our Lord's Heart the mystery of love was unveiled to us. . ."; and referring to the Sacred Heart he terms it: "the Shrine of reconciliation between God and man." In Italy, the beneficent effects of this reform coupled with the influence of St. Catherine of Siena gave a new impetus to the devotion whose fruits were manifest in the lives of men such as St. Antoninus, Bl. John Dominic, Bl. Matthew Cerreri, Savanarola, Ignatius del Nente and Father Ridolfi (the latter, a Master General). A few lines from a sermon of St. Antoninus are indicative of the reverence and love all these holy friars bore for the Sacred Heart:

" . . . fly therefore as a dove on the wings of holy meditation and consider the wounds of Christ . . . that large Wound of the Side and the Open Heart whence issued blood and water. . . He loved you and every rational creature with a love so strong that there is no tongue that can express it."

As noted earlier one of the primary means by which the Dominican friars spread devotion to the Sacred Heart was in their capacity as spiritual advisors. No where was this more obvious than in the convents of Dominican sisters and nuns. There is an abundance of documentary evidence clearly indicating that the work of the friars, in spreading the devotion in this way, bore much fruit.<sup>10</sup> This is notably true in Germany. In the words of Father Angelus Walz:

"The testimonies of the historically proved veneration of the Heart of Jesus by the daughters of St. Dominic are manifested in their prayers, lives and also in the codices, found in their convents adorned with various texts concerning the Heart of Jesus."<sup>11</sup>

Just to cite a few instances of convents where the devotion was known to flourish; in the province of Teutonia: the convents of Unterlinder at Kolmar, those at Toss, the monasteries of Katharenenthal near Dossenhofen, of Kirchberg near Maigerloch, and

of Oetenbach near Tigur (where, it is recorded, at least two of the nuns had visions of the Sacred Heart). In Bavaria, we encounter a devotion equally strong. This is perhaps best exemplified in the convent of Engethal near Nuremberg, where Christina Ebner passed many holy years. In the monastery of Maria-Modingen near Dillengen, the even more famous but not related, Venerable Margaret Ebner, outstanding in her fidelity to the Sacred Heart, at the command of her confessor wrote an account of her revelations. The correspondence between this holy nun and Father Henry of Nordlingen is still in existence and is full of devotion to the Sacred Heart. She frequently refers to Our Lord as the Most Sweet Master, from Whose Heart all knowledge flowed forth by an ardent love.

No account of the early centuries which did not mention the most famous of all Dominican sisters could be considered even relatively complete. St. Catherine of Siena is the third member of the Dominican family singled out by the late Holy Father in his encyclical. Her influence was felt in all branches of the Order throughout Italy. Her famous *Dialogues* frequently speak with great reverence of union with the Sacred Heart. Bl. Raymond of Capua relates that so great was her devotion that in 1370, Our Lord deigned to have an exchange of hearts with St. Catherine. In her dialogues with the Master the following exchange took place:

O . . . Immaculate Lamb! You were dead when Your Side was opened, why did You wish to be struck and wounded in the Heart? And He answered: That you should remember that there were sufficient reasons which I had; . . . I wished you to see the secret of My Heart, shown open that you could see that I loved more than I could show by finite pains.<sup>12</sup>

Other Dominican nuns and sisters in Italy were known to have followed the example of this renowned contemplative in her veneration of the Sacred Heart. Among some of the better known were Bl. Margaret of Savoy (d. 1464), Bl. Hosanna Andreasi (d. 1505), Bl. Stephana Quinzani (d. 1530) and St. Catherine de Ricci (d. 1589).

In Spain the Venerable Louis of Granada, renowned for the literary quality as well as the spiritual content of his works, was one of the leaders in fostering the devotion. In many of his very successful works are frequent allusions to the wounded Heart of the Saviour, and the benefits derived from recourse to that Sacred source. In one very striking passage he writes:

Then comes the soldier with lance in hand and thrusts it with great force through the bare breast of the Saviour. The cross rocked in air with the force of the blow and from the wound there came forth water and blood which wash away the sins of the world. . . . May God bless you Wound of the Precious Side that you may wound the devout hearts, . . . Rose of ineffable beauty, Ruby of inestimable price, Entrance to the Heart of Christ, Testimony of His love and Pledge of life everlasting.<sup>13</sup>

Carrying the tradition to the New World, the Spanish Dominicans saw it bear fruit in the remarkable sanctity of St. Rose of Lima. This first saint of the Americas heard the cry of Our Lord saying: "Give me your heart." On Palm Sunday the nineteenth of March 1617, He called her "Rose of My heart" which title has since been incorporated in the Invitatory of her office.

Germany, Italy, Spain, certainly not an exhaustive list of the areas within the Order wherein the devotion flourished, yet it is an indicative list, for these were all key provinces of the Order in any major undertaking and therefore fairly accurate gauges of its overall spirit.

#### DEVELOPMENTS IN MORE RECENT CENTURIES

Passing over to the mid-19th Century, we find that in the period immediately preceding, the Order as well as the Church, had been in a period of decline. Yet, as in the first years when in a very real sense France had been the cradle of the Order, so now in the great revival of the 19th century within the Order, it is once again to France that our attention is directed. The names of Jandel and Lacordaire and the part they played in bringing it all about will not soon be forgotten. And just as in the first century of the Order's existence devotion to the Sacred Heart so quickly took hold, so now in its revival in France, the Order would once again manifest its fidelity to that tradition which by this time had received a new and powerful impetus from the revelations to St. Margaret Mary.

As might be expected, Lacordaire was one of the leaders in reviving this facet of Dominican spirituality in France. On February 10, 1847, speaking at the church of St. Roch, he gave a sermon urging the erection of the first church of the Sacred Heart in France. Due to his influence a church in Moulins was dedicated to the Sacred Heart. However the point we wish to single out as being the major contribution of the Order toward the re-establishment of the devotion in France, was the part it played in the

erection of the magnificent tribute that is Sacre Coeur, the basilica at Montmartre.

The idea of a national act of reparation in the form of a church dedicated to the Sacred Heart came into being in the Dominican convent in Poitiers.<sup>14</sup> There, some tertiaries, among whom were M. Royault de Fleury and his son-in-law M. Legentil, had been mutually grieved over the evils which had overtaken France. Realizing that many of these evils which had befallen them could deservedly be chastisements of God for the ungrateful conduct of so many Frenchmen, they hit upon the idea of a national promise to erect a church in reparation for the many insults suffered by the Sacred Heart. M. de Fleury, who became the principal promoter of the work, saw that such an undertaking in such difficult times would fare much better if it had the public approval of the Church, particularly the Holy Father. Being a loyal son of St. Dominic, he could think of no better way to obtain that approval than through the Master General, Pere Jandel. His hopes were not unfounded. In an audience on the 26th of February 1871, the Holy Father, Pius IX, endorsed this reparative work with his blessing.

The following year, Pere Monsabré, O.P., preaching at Notre Dame in Paris, pointed out that since it was in sinning against the love of Christ that Frenchmen had fallen, it would be fitting that the monument of expiation be to the Sacred Heart, the natural symbol of that love against which they had sinned. Further, he urged that on that monument be engraved the inscription: *Christo Jesu et ejus sacratissimo Cordi, Gallia poenitens et devota.*<sup>15</sup>

Members of the Third Order continued to play a prominent part in the project. Just as it had been one of their members who was the promoter of the idea of this national act of penance, so it was also a member, M. Emile Keller, who assumed the burden of proposing the adoption of the project to the National Assembly in the name of the French people. On the 24th of July 1873, the Assembly approved the project and the first steps toward the erection of the now famous basilica had been taken.

Pere Jandel, who as a Frenchman had rejoiced in in this proposal, as Master General, drew from it the further notion of consecrating the entire Order to the Sacred Heart, which notion became a reality when he promulgated it on the feast of St. Thomas in 1872. These two historic events in the life of the Order during the 19th century, i.e., erection of the basilica and consecration of the Order, place rather forcefully before our eyes the



fact that the traditional devotion to the Sacred Heart was far from waning in France or elsewhere. In the United States, for instance, the Most Reverend Richard Pius Miles, O.P., the first bishop of Nashville, gave his complete approval to the establishment of the Society of the Most Sacred Heart in all parishes of his diocese. At least five of the institutions begun by Dominican sisters in various parts of the country during that century, whether mother houses or colleges, were dedicated to the Sacred Heart.

In our own century there are many evidences that the devotion has retained its firm hold within the Order. In 1905, Father Lepidi, Master of the Sacred Palace, came strongly to the defense of the devotion to the Eucharistic Heart—which was under attack at the time—in his treatise *De Cultu Cordis Jesu Eucharistici explicatio dogmatica*. He also composed a prayer to the Eucharistic Heart exposed in the Blessed Sacrament which was published and indulgenced by Pope Leo XIII in 1902. In 1926, Father Hugon published a work on the Eucharistic Heart, followed in the next year by Father Angelus Walz's series of articles in the *Torch*: Notes on Devotion to the Heart of Jesus in the Order of Preachers (which had actually been published in the *Analecta* the year before). Father Garrigou-Lagrange has sections on the Eucharistic Heart in several of his works such as *Christian Perfection and Contemplation*.

In 1949, the General Chapter of the Order held at Washington, D. C., ordained that the whole Order should be consecrated to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, with the expressed wish that the consecration be renewed each year.

This obviously has not been an exhaustive study. Yet, in the light of these pages it seems safe to say that devotion to the Most Sacred Heart is not a novelty in the Order but on the contrary an ancient and honored tradition dating from the very earliest years of its activities. It is a tradition which should not be overlooked but rather recalled with a justifiable pride that will spur us on to greater efforts to preach and propagate what our late Holy Father called: "the inestimable gift which the Incarnate Word . . . gave to the Church"—devotion to the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus.

## FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Pius XII, *Haurietis Aquas*, NCWC translation, n. 8.
- <sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*, n. 116.
- <sup>3</sup> J. V. Bainvel, S.J., *Devotion to the Sacred Heart, the Doctrine and Its History*. Trans. from 5th French edition by E. Leahy. N. Y. Benziger Brothers, 1924. p. 231.
- <sup>4</sup> Jordan of Saxony, O.P., Letters to Bl. Diana of Andalo. *Love among the Saints*. Translated by Kathleen Pond. London. Bloomsbury Publishing Co., Ltd., 1958. Letter N. 7 (XVIII).
- <sup>5</sup> Albert the Great, O.P., *De Eucharistia*, dist. I, c. 1, ed. Borgnet XXXVIII, p. 193.
- <sup>6</sup> Bainvel, *op. cit.*, pp. 196-203.
- <sup>7</sup> Johann Tauler, O.P., A Selection from the Sermons of. *Signposts to Perfection*. Selected, edited and translated by Elizabeth Strakosch. St. Louis, Mo., B. Herder Book Co. 1958.
- <sup>8</sup> M. Quinlan, S.J., *History of Devotion to the Sacred Heart. The Irish Ecclesiastical Record* LVII (1941), p. 254.
- <sup>9</sup> Bainvel, *op. cit.*, p. 158.
- <sup>10</sup> Angelus M. Walz, O.P., Notes on Devotion to the Heart of Jesus in the Order of Preachers. *The Torch*, Jan., 1927. Rosary Press, Somerset, Ohio. p. 8.
- <sup>11</sup> Walz, *De Veneratione Divini Cordis Jesu*. Rome. Angelicum. 1937. p. 39.
- <sup>12</sup> St. Catherine of Siena, *Dialogues*. Translated by Algar Thorold. Westminster, Md. The Newman Press. 1950. c. 75, pp. 170, 171.
- <sup>13</sup> *Obras de Fr. Luis de Granada de la Orden de Santo Domingo*. Edicion critica por Fr. Justo Cuervo de la misma Orden. Madrid. 1906. II 78.
- Walz, *The Torch*, Feb., 1927, p. 25.
- <sup>14</sup> Xavier Faucher, O.P., Le Voeu National Au Sacre-Coeur, *L'Annee Dominicaine*, 1919, p. 194.
- <sup>15</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 197. For an account of the Consecration of the Basilica and the part played by Dominicans on that great occasion. Cf. pp. 253-258 of the same issue.



“ . . . we must not say that this devotion began because it was privately revealed by God or that it suddenly came into existence in the Church, but rather that it is the spontaneous flowering of a living and fervent faith by which men filled with supernatural grace were led to adore the Redeemer and His glorious wounds as symbols of His boundless love which stirred their souls to the very depths.”

(POPE PIUS XII, *Haurietis Aquas*)