

*The Significance of
Devotion to the Sacred Heart
in 17th Century France*

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Introduction

St Margaret Mary Alacoque (1647-1690)¹ is popularly credited with introducing the practice of devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus into the devotional life of the Church. She was not, in fact, the first to popularise such a devotion, but her association with it bears witness to the reception of this practice in her culture and era. We can therefore ask, as a historical question, what message the devotion, in the form which she proposed, offered to the Catholics of her time.

The Devotion Taught by St Margaret Mary Alacoque

Our starting point must be a clear understanding of the devotion which St Margaret Mary herself sought to promote. Here we prescind from the matter of the origin of the devotion - whether it was directly revealed by God, or the invention of a nun's fervent prayer life, is a question for spiritual theologians, not historians. The *attribution* of the devotion to a private revelation, however, must surely have affected the way it was received by the faithful.

The cult proposed by St Margaret Mary, which she attributed to revelations received in 1673-75,² included the following elements:³

- ♥ Blessings were promised to any family or community which honoured Jesus by reverently displaying an image of His Sacred Heart, or honouring Him by this title.⁴
- ♥ A feast day should be kept on the Friday after the octave of Corpus Christi, on which devotees should receive communion

¹ M. L. Lynn, "Alacoque, Margaret Mary, St.", p. 237 in *New Catholic Encyclopaedia*, Vol I.

² Lynn, *loc. cit.*

³ P. Doyle, *Butler's Lives of the Saints, New Full Edition: October*, 106.

⁴ V. Kerns, *The Autobiography of Saint Margaret Mary*, 97ff.

and make an act of reparation for indignities committed against the exposed Blessed Sacrament. Those who did so would experience the power of Christ's love.⁵

- ♥ Devotees should receive communion on the first Friday of every month, and make an hour of reparation each Thursday evening.⁶ The grace of final perseverance (i.e. a guarantee of dying in a state of grace, and so reaching heaven ultimately, with the last sacraments for those who require them) was promised to those who receive communion in honour of the Sacred Heart on the first Fridays of nine consecutive months.⁷

The distinctive acts of the proposed devotion would be to:

- i. promote the use of the actual image of the Sacred Heart;
- ii. encourage more frequent communion;
- iii. foster a culture of reparation through prayer and Eucharistic communion;
- iv. offer a guarantee of final perseverance.

The mention of frequent communion, the means of reparation, and the promise of final perseverance, are all highly significant in the religious culture of France at that time; we will consider this at length below. First, however, we will explore the symbolism in art and theology of the Sacred Heart itself.

⁵ Kerns, 78.

⁶ Kerns, 47, records that this was asked of Margaret Mary (with no indication of involving others), specifically to pray between 11 p.m. and midnight on Thursdays; she was also exhorted to receive communion as often as possible, bearing any humiliation arising from this as a sign of His love.

⁷ Kerns, 99.

The Christian Concept of the “Heart”

The heart is not only a physical organ, but also a symbol of the inner person in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. The various Hebrew words for *heart* stem from the root *leb* (לֵב), and the Hebrew concept is effectively identical with that expressed in the Greek New Testament and the Septuagint by *kardia* (καρδιά). In Biblical usage, the heart is the seat of not only the emotions, but also, with equal weight, of the intellect and of moral decision-making.⁸

For most of the first millennium of Christianity, the Latin *cor* retained the full Biblical range of meanings, with Augustine placing particular emphasis on its reference to the locus of individuality and religious experience. Gradually, however, the Christian West began to speak of the heart as primarily the seat of the emotions, while the East emphasised its place as an inner sanctum, even one liberated from bodily passions.⁹

In the contemporary English-speaking world, the graphical symbol of a heart generally indicates love, or the seat of the emotions; linguistic use of the word “heart” also more commonly indicates emotion, rooted in this Western drift of meaning of “heart”. But because of the influence of Bible translations rendering לֵב and καρδιά as *heart*, the word also has an English heritage encompassing the intellect and will, which survives to this day in the phrase “learn by heart”.¹⁰ In any case, we must beware of reading the usual connotations of our contemporary English word when we consider translated texts from 17th Century France.

⁸ Buttrick *et al.*, eds., *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, Volume 2. “Heart”: 549-550; Bromiley *et al.*, eds., *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, Volume Two. “Heart”: 650-653; Balz & Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, Volume 2. “καρδιά”: 250-251,

⁹ M. Meslin, “Heart”, 234-237 in M. Eliade, ed., *The Encyclopaedia of Religion*, Volume 6.

¹⁰ Simpson & Weiner, *Oxford English Dictionary*, Volume VII, p. 61. Note especially senses 5 (=mind) and 12 (=seat of intellect, *cf.* learn by heart).

One particularly illustrative text from that time and culture is Blaise Pascal's *Pensées*.¹¹ Pascal (1623-1662)¹² – a contemporary of Margaret Mary – develops a line of thought in which the heart is understood primarily as the seat of the will, the place where choices are made: especially the choice of loving God.¹³ This usage cannot, however, be assumed to be typical of that of the ordinary French-speaker of the time.

Earlier Devotion to the Heart of Jesus

The first clear association between the physical heart of Christ pierced for love of mankind, and the “heart” of God as the symbol of God’s love for humanity, is found in the late 11th Century writings of Anselm; this marks the foundation of a vein of mysticism “in which the divine heart and the human heart unite in an exchange of love”, modelled on Christ’s own passion.¹⁴ Thirteenth century mystics¹⁵ often reported experiences of an “exchange of hearts” with God, and the early Franciscans, notably Bonaventure (1221-1274), encouraged the contemplation of the wounded heart of Christ – an exercise entirely in keeping with the memory of the stigmatised Frances. This early devotion, particularly the “Helfta style” developed by Ss Gertrude and Mechtildis, is regarded by S. F. Thomas as being more Trinitarian than what followed three centuries later in France, and less concerned with the unworthiness of the devotee than other contemporary spiritual practices.¹⁶

¹¹ Highlighted by Meslin, in *Eliade*, 237.

¹² Pascal, *Pensées*, ed. H. T. Barnwell, xv-xviii.

¹³ Pascal, *Pensées*, CCEL edition, paragraphs 277-289.

¹⁴ Meslin, *op. cit.*, 236.

¹⁵ Including: Lutgard of Aywières (early 13th Century); Mechtilde of Magdebourg (1207-1282) and St Gertrude at Helfta in Saxony (1256-1334); Meslin, *loc cit.*. St Margaret Mary herself had a similar experience on 27 December 1673: Kerns, 45.

¹⁶ S. Thomas, *Butler’s Lives of the Saints, New Full Edition: November*, 134.

In late mediaeval times, the cult of the “Five Wounds of Christ” became very popular, as a way of meditating on the Passion.¹⁷ After Christ’s hands and feet, the “fifth wound” was regarded as that where the lance pierced the side of Jesus. From the 13th Century, Dominicans kept a feast of the Wound in the Lord’s Side on the Friday after the Octave of Corpus Christi.¹⁸ Fourteenth century mystic Blessed Henry Suso began to speak of the wounded side as the point of entry into the Heart of Christ, while St Catherine of Siena (†1380) understood Christ to be telling her that the wounded opening of his Heart was the sign of the abundance of His love.¹⁹ Julian of Norwich († c. 1416)²⁰ received a mystical experience of Christ’s “blessed heart split in two” as a token of His love, where it rested in a cavity of the wounded side “large enough for all mankind that will be saved.”²¹

Although the wound in the side of Christ was often portrayed *in situ*, on his torso, artistry also developed a “heraldic” representation of the wounds, where a wounded heart represented the wounded side. Extant examples include a Netherlandish wooden carving, c. 1480 (illustrated right); a late 15th Century English prayer roll including a blazon of the five wounds superimposed on other



¹⁷ L. Gougaud, *Devotional and Ascetic Practices in the Middle Ages*, 75ff., traces the rise of devotion to the Five Wounds, through the gradual introduction of the crucifix as an image of Christ from the late 6th century. The choice to focus on these particular five wounds comes only from the time of the stigmatization of St Frances of Assisi, in 1224.

¹⁸ Gougaud, 95.

¹⁹ Gougaud, 96 (also, for dates, pp. 87-88).

²⁰ E. Colledge & J. Walsh, *Julian of Norwich: Showings*, 19.

²¹ Colledge & Walsh, 220-221 (the 10th revelation and 24th chapter of Julian’s long text).

instruments of the Passion, and a 1652 oil painting showing the Bishop of Ghent at his devotions.²² Generally the heart was depicted as a *substitute* for the whole body of Christ in these stylized images. The devotion to the Five Wounds declined after the Reformation, but as Finaldi²³ notes, “the devotion to the wound in the side, however, was transformed into the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus”.

Ludolph of Saxony, St Peter of Alcantara, and Louis de Blois (16th century) all wrote of Jesus’s desire that we should penetrate His Heart.²⁴ Daniel-Rops²⁵ finds devotion to the Sacred Heart implicit or explicit in many sixteenth century writers, and becoming established in certain religious houses in Liège, Colmar and Cologne. Lanspergius (†1539), a Carthusian of Cologne, encouraged the display of an image of the Divine Heart, with certain pious exercises to be made each time it be passed.²⁶

By the start of the 17th century, St Frances de Sales (1567-1622) was promoting a Sacred Heart devotion to the order of Visitation Sisters which he founded with St Jane de Chantal, speaking of the heart as the core of a person’s emotions, intellect and will. He even proposed



a “coat of arms” for the order, depicting a single heart crowned with thorns and engraved with the names of Jesus and Mary. This later became the basis of a design engraved on the pectoral cross (left²⁷) worn by every Visitation sister – the very order which was to be graced with the revelation of

²² G. Finaldi, *The Image of Christ*, 160-161, 164-165.

²³ Finaldi, 135.

²⁴ Gougaud, 96-97.

²⁵ H. Daniel-Rops, *The Church in the Seventeenth Century*, 247-248.

²⁶ Gougaud, 102.

²⁷ Detail from a portrait of St Jeanne de Chantal in 1636, published opposite page 224 in E. Stopp, *Madame de Chantal: Portrait of a Saint*.

the Sacred Heart to one of its members, Sr Margaret Mary Alacoque.²⁸

Active slightly later than Frances de Sales, the missionary John Eudes²⁹ spent the mid 17th Century promoting devotion to the Heart of Mary, before eventually turning his attention to the Heart of the Lord. He composed an Office of the Sacred Heart in 1670, and established a Feast in its honour for his order two years later. He developed a grand theology in which this Heart symbolised the love of God, by which humanity was created and redeemed, given the gift of the Eucharist and invited to make reparation for sins – a message not dissimilar to that claimed by Margaret Mary from her revelations of 1673-75.

The Historical Context of the 17th Century

Our study now demands an appreciation of the religious climate of 17th Century France. Daniel-Rops dares³⁰ to propose that France had been the “spiritual guide of the entire West until about 1660”, citing the heritage of mystics such as Bérulle, Vincent de Paul and Olier. But in the mid-17th Century, spirituality become a subject of antagonistic debate in France, riven between Jansenist proponents of austere asceticism as a necessary means of understanding humanity’s wretchedness before God, and those Quietists who held that simply willing to love God was a sufficient and indeed swifter route to sanctity. Nor was France immune from spiritual currents from further afield: the Rhineland mystics offered a path to union with a very abstract notion of God, while the reform of the Carmelite order, supported in France by Bérulle, emphasised the imitation of Jesus

²⁸ Daniel-Rops, 248; W. Wright, *Sacred Heart: Gateway to God*, 51-54.

²⁹ Daniel-Rops, 248; see also Wright, 60-68.

³⁰ Daniel-Rops, 244ff.

Christ.³¹

A key feature of the Catholic counter-reformation was the institution of *missions*, preached to revive the practice of the faith in countries such as France. St Vincent de Paul's Lazarists specialised in catechising and leading the faithful in an examination of conscience; Capuchins and Liguori's Redemptorists employed a more theatrical approach aimed at provoking an emotional response. Many missionaries promoted a fairly restrained form of mental devotion, in France known as the *oraison mentale*. Different missionary orders had specific devotions which they promoted, the Eudists notably highlighting devotion to the Sacred Heart.³² The Catholic process of (counter-)reformation generally resulted in popular devotion becoming institutionalised, and centred on the parish church.³³

Frequent Communion

How frequently was Holy Communion received by the faithful in this period? Even in the mid 16th century there were many pious confraternities urging their members to frequent communion.³⁴ Daniel-Rops similarly finds³⁵ that the tide had already turned against the mediaeval practice which discouraged regular reception of the Sacrament; indeed, Jesuits has condemned this older viewpoint, and Frances de Sales was encouraging devout Catholics to receive 2 or 3 times per month, or even every Sunday with their confessor's permission. A survey by a Jesuit college in Alsace found that the number of annual communions (the location of which is not specified) trebled from 7000 in 1650 to more than 21,000 in 1670. By

³¹ L. Dupré & D. E. Sayers, *Christian Spirituality: Post-Reformation and Modern*, 44.

³² Dupré & Sayers, 97-101.

³³ Dupré & Sayers, 104.

³⁴ Dupré & Sayers, 115.

³⁵ Daniel-Rops, 106, 241.

the start of the 18th century, “frequent communion” (by which Daniel-Rops³⁶ seems to mean every Sunday) seems to have been universal. In Spain, many confessors were urging daily communion. Jansenist writers, on the other hand, warned the faithful not to “approach the sacraments without serious preparation”.

Reparation

Daniel-Rops (whose “History of the Church” reflects in particular the Church as it existed in France) notes³⁷ that the 16th Century marked a reassertion of a “culture of penance” in Christendom which had been in abeyance for the previous 200 years. The popularity of newly-built retreat centres and the demand for spiritual books bore witness to the popular hunger for spirituality, and there are many records of the devotions of pious layfolk: common practices included nocturnal adoration, scapulars, hair shirts, and repeated reverences at the foot of a crucifix. Litanies became so popular that Rome had to regulate their use. This outpouring of popular yet penitential piety attests the willingness of the faithful to invest their time in exercises which they believed were pleasing to God.

Final Perseverance

In 1547, the Sixth Session of the Council of Trent devoted much time to the thorny question of *justification*, steering a course between the old Pelagian heresy of saving oneself by one’s own actions, and the new Protestant error of denying any role for the human subject in co-operating with God’s grace.³⁸ After setting out how we can appeal to Christ for mercy, Trent warned “no one can know with a certitude of

³⁶ Daniel-Rops, 241-242.

³⁷ Daniel-Rops, 106, 109, 241ff.

³⁸ J. Dupuis, *The Christian Faith*, p. 747.

faith which cannot be subject to error, that one has obtained God's grace."³⁹ Thus no person could rashly presume to be predestined to eternal life "for without special revelation it is impossible to know whom God has chosen for himself".⁴⁰ The Council therefore exhorted Catholics to hope and trust, but not claim certainty, that God would grant each faithful soul the gift of "final perseverance".⁴¹

Many Catholic theologians of the 17th Century – among them Robert Bellarmine and Francis Suarez (Jesuits), most Scotists, the Thomist followers of Bañez and the Augustinians – held that God could and did predestine some souls to eternal damnation. Only Frances de Sales and Leonard Lessius stood out by teaching the universal salvific will of God. (This does not contradict the teaching of Trent as long as God does not impose his salvific will on those who freely refuse to co-operate with grace.) Yet the church of the time was confronted by Calvinist teaching on double predestination, and Calvin had quoted many patristic sources in favour of his position. Since Catholic apologists needed to distance themselves from Calvin's position, the result was a reinterpretation of the writings of St Paul and Augustine, towards a more optimistic emphasis on the possibility of receiving God's grace. Eventually, with the condemnation of Jansenist views, this optimistic opinion became the theological mainstream.⁴²

The Reception and Significance of the Devotion

Ecclesiastical authorities were slow to welcome Margaret Mary Alacoque's message, "refusing to sanction it in the 1680s and again

³⁹ Dupuis, p. 754, text from Chapter IX of the Sixth Session of Trent, Denz. 1534.

⁴⁰ Dupuis, p. 756, text from Chapter XII of the Sixth Session of Trent, Denz. 1540.

⁴¹ Dupuis, p. 757, text from Chapter XIII of the Sixth Session of Trent, Denz. 1541.

⁴² Dupré & Sayers, 35; J. Pelikan, *Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300-1700)*, 374ff.; condemnation of Jansenist errors in Innocent X's 1653 *Cum Occasione*, see Dupuis pp. 768-769.

in 1729”.⁴³ Only in 1765 did Clement XIII grant an optional feast day under the title of the “Sacred Heart of Jesus”.⁴⁴ An abortive attempt to beatify Margaret Mary was begun in 1714, with a new attempt in 1819 coming to fruition in 1864, and crowned with her canonization in 1920. The Feast of the Sacred Heart was only made obligatory on the universal church from 1856. Our concern, however, is with the popular response to the devotion in its own time.

The Image and the Feast Day

It is clear that the use of the image of the Sacred Heart was not new to art in the 1670s. There was a longstanding tradition of using the wounded heart to represent Christ’s wounded side, which in turn evoked a rich symbolism, such as “water flowing from the right side of the temple”, and the Eucharistic connotations of Christ’s blood. Depiction of the heart emphasised the humanity of Jesus, affirming the Spanish Carmelite tradition rather than the abstract God of the Rhineland mystics.



The idea of making pious devotions to an image of Christ’s Heart was anticipated a century before Margaret Mary by Lanspergius of Cologne. The actual image witnessed by the visionary Alacoque (illustrated left⁴⁵), and duplicated at her direction in 1685, was of a free-standing heart, encircled by a crown of thorns and by the names of Jesus’s extended family; the word *CHARITAS* appeared written

within the heart’s gaping wound. But the artistic form which was

⁴³ Dupré & Sayers, 118.

⁴⁴ Daniel-Rops, footnote on p. 249.

⁴⁵ Wright, 42.

popularly circulated in response to her message was that of the Sacred Heart displayed exteriorly on the breast of Christ. By the end of the 19th Century, the Holy See had specified that this was the only form of the image suitable for public devotion.⁴⁶

Since pious devotions were subject to a degree of ecclesiastical regulation even in the counter-reformation climate of the 17th Century, the spread of devotion to the Sacred Heart may have been significantly impeded, except where sanctioned e.g. by the Eudist missionaries. The individualist turn in devotion caused partly by ecclesial regulation, and exemplified by the shift from communal Eucharistic processions to turn-taking 40 Hours Devotions,⁴⁷ would create a climate where enshrinement of the Sacred Heart image in the home, rather than in the midst of communal devotions, would be well received. The institution of a feast-day would have to wait rather longer - until the 19th Century - for its full approbation.

Frequent Communion

The promotion of frequent communion was not novel, but remained controversial in the face of Jansenist currents. If Margaret Mary's message was a true revelation, then Jesus was clearly not on the side of the Jansenists! The positive reception of her message confirmed the popular trend away from the mediaeval fear of receiving communion, towards a practice of communicating several times a month. Communion on the first Fridays, of course, required voluntary attendance at church beyond Sundays and Holy Days.

⁴⁶ Wright, 43.

⁴⁷ Dupré & Sayers, 116.

Reparation

Particularly noteworthy is the fusion of the concepts of frequent communion and reparation. The Sacred Heart message clearly conforms to the popular sensibility that the faithful are required to do penance in reparation for sins against God. Yet the remedy for unworthy treatment of the Blessed Sacrament is not a hyper-reverential refusal to receive communion, but rather the counteracting of unworthy communions by worthy ones, well-prepared and in accordance with the will of Christ. This too would be a message in clear opposition to Jansenist teaching.

Final Perseverance

Finally, in a century when St Frances de Sales was pioneering belief in the universal salvific will of Christ in the face of Trent's somewhat pessimistic warnings against presumption, the Sacred Heart message offered a radical optimism: it seemed that Jesus was willing to guarantee salvation – the gift of final perseverance – to those who embraced this devotion. Even Trent, after all, allowed that God might make known by private revelation, who was destined to be saved!

This, then, was perhaps the greatest significance of the devotion in its era. Trent balanced hope in God's salvific will against warnings of presuming that one would be faithful to the end, resulting in a neurotic spirituality which promoted doubt of one's own salvation. The Sacred Heart devotion, then, offered not only a potent symbol of Christ's love, but the security of a relationship with Christ which, on the strength of His own words to Margaret Mary, seemed to guarantee salvation.

Conclusion

Very little in Margaret Mary Alacoque's "revelation" would have been received as novel in its time, and much of the content would have seemed uncontroversial. Calls for more frequent communion and reparation would accord with the popular religious mood of the age, notwithstanding Jansenist opposition. Her message would have promoted the image of the Sacred Heart, already common enough, as one particularly appropriate for enshrinement and private devotions in the home. It would take rather longer for the institutional church to canonize her request for a feast on a particular day, though the Dominican heritage shows that the chosen day was not without precedent. The one truly radical element of the Sacred Heart Devotion was its great optimism about the possibility of salvation, against the climate of a pessimistic theological culture. This would have appeared as "good news" indeed to a Christian people fearful for their own salvation.

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