

Dilexit Nos: The Importance of the Heart

Last month we started looking at Pope Francis' new encyclical letter, *Dilexit Nos*, 'On the Human and Divine Love of the Heart of Jesus Christ'. Today we start reflecting on its teachings in more detail.

The first of the five chapters is entitled, 'The Importance of the Heart'. The Holy Father first explores what we mean by 'the heart' in this context. The physical organ is a symbol of a deeper reality. He writes: 'From ancient times...there has been an appreciation of the fact that human beings are not simply a sum of different skills, but a unity of body and soul with a coordinating centre...' (3) 'The Bible tells us that, "the Word of God is living and active... it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (*Heb 4:12*). In this way, it speaks to us of the heart as a core that lies hidden beneath all outward appearances, even beneath the superficial thoughts that can lead us astray.' (4)

It is also, the Pope says, 'the locus of sincerity, where deceit and disguise have no place. It usually indicates our true intentions, what we really think, believe and desire, the "secrets" that we tell no one...' (5) 'This interior reality of each person is frequently concealed behind a great deal of "foliage", which makes it difficult for us not only to understand ourselves, but even more to know others.' The Holy Father quotes the prophet Jeremiah: "'The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse, who can understand it?'" (*Jer 17:9*) And he continues: 'Despite our every attempt to appear as something we are not, our heart is the ultimate judge, not of what we show or hide from others, but of who we truly are.' (6)

The Pope's teaching aligns with the language and doctrine of Scripture and Tradition, indeed of Our Lord himself. So the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches: 'The spiritual tradition of the Church...emphasises the *heart*, in the biblical sense of the depths of one's being, where the person decides for or against God.' (n. 368; cf. *Jer 31:33; Deut 6:5; 29:3; Isa 29:13; Ezek 36:26; Mt 6:21; Lk 8:15; Rom 5:5*) 'The sixth beatitude proclaims, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."' (n. 2518; *Mt 5:8*)

'In naming the source of prayer, Scripture speaks sometimes of the soul or the spirit, but most often of the heart (more than a thousand times).' (n. 2562) 'The heart is our hidden centre, beyond the grasp of our reason and of others; only the Spirit of God can fathom the human heart and know it fully. The heart is the place of decision, deeper than our psychic drives. It is the place of truth, where we choose life or death.' (n. 2563)

In the context of its teaching about the passions (i.e. emotions or feelings) (nn. 1762-75), the *Catechism* affirms: 'The perfection of the moral good consists in man's being moved to the good not only by his will but also by his "heart."' (n. 1775; cf. n. 1770; *Ps 84:2*) This means that the emotions, which are functions of body and soul together, do have a role in the moral life.

The *Catechism* does also say: 'Strong feelings are not *decisive* for the morality or the holiness of persons.' (n. 1768, emphasis added) Our emotions are not fully in our control. The indispensable point in our life with God is not that we strongly *feel* faith, or love, or repentance; but that we *choose* to believe, choose God's will above all, choose to repudiate sin.

Even so, in the ideal state of being, we are moved by both will and feeling together. Speaking of ‘the heart’ brings in and blends the bodily and emotional aspect with that of the spiritual soul.

The will is a power specifically of the soul, and we do loosely speak of ‘the will’ making choices. But more precisely, it is the *person* who chooses, *in virtue of* his will; and the human person himself is a unity of body and soul. (The soul separated from the body after death is no longer a complete person, but awaits the resurrection.) The Pope shows how speaking of the heart highlights our ‘profound core’ (21) and ‘personal centre’, correcting exaggerated tendencies to view ‘our human powers and passions...in isolation from one another’. (10)

Having reflected on what we mean by the heart, the Holy Father is able to set forth its supreme importance. He writes: ‘Instead of running after superficial satisfactions and playing a role for the benefit of others, we would do better to think about the really important questions in life. Who am I, really? What am I looking for? What direction do I want to give to my life, my decisions and my actions? Why and for what purpose am I in this world? How do I want to look back on my life once it ends? What meaning do I want to give to all my experiences? Who do I want to be for others? Who am I for God? All these questions lead us back to the heart.’ (8)

‘All our actions need to be put under the...rule of the heart...The mind and the will are put at the service of the greater good by sensing and savouring truths...The will desires the greater good that the heart recognises, while the imagination and emotions are themselves guided by the beating of the heart.’ (13)

‘It could be said, then, that I am my heart, for my heart is what sets me apart, shapes my spiritual identity and puts me in communion with other people.’ (14) ‘At the same time, the heart makes all authentic bonding possible, since a relationship not shaped by the heart is incapable of overcoming the fragmentation caused by individualism...A society dominated by narcissism and self-centredness will increasingly become “heartless”.’ (17)

Pope Francis uses the example of the heart of Mary. He writes: ‘The heart is also capable of unifying and harmonising our personal history, which may seem hopelessly fragmented, yet is the place where everything can make sense. The Gospel tells us this in speaking of Our Lady, who saw things with the heart. She was able to dialogue with the things she experienced by pondering them in her heart, treasuring their memory and viewing them in a greater perspective.

‘The best expression of how the heart thinks is found in the two passages in Saint Luke’s Gospel that speak to us of how Mary “treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart” (cf. *Lk* 2:19 and 51)...What Mary “kept” was not only her memory of what she had seen and heard, but also those aspects of it that she did not yet understand; these nonetheless remained present and alive in her memory, waiting to be “put together” in her heart.’ (19)

And pointing ahead to the fundamental theme of the encyclical, the love of Christ, the Holy Father affirms (21): ‘Everything finds its unity in the heart, which can be the dwelling-place of love in all its spiritual, psychic and even physical dimensions. In a word, if love reigns in our heart, we become, in a complete and luminous way, the persons we are meant to be, for every human being is created above all else for love. In the deepest fibre of our being, we were made to love and to be loved.’