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THE ROLE OF THE CULT  
OF THE SACRED HEART OF JESUS  
IN THE PURSUIT OF HOLINESS

INTRODUCTION

Man's aspiration to holiness is closely linked to God's desire for the salvation of every human being (cf. 1 Tim 2:3-4). The universal vocation to holiness thus signifies God's salvific intention, which invites us to share in His holiness. Worship of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, which points to the selfless love of God revealed in the Heart of Jesus Christ, is an important aid to human sanctification. It contributes to the Church's task of sanctifying the faithful through the sacred liturgy, which is the fulfilment of the priestly task of Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this article is to point out the pedagogical content of the veneration of the Sacred Heart aimed at the sanctification of man and his union with God. First, the question of the universal vocation to holiness will be discussed in the light of the cult of the Divine Heart. In the next section, the Heart of Jesus will be presented as the source of love and human holiness. For those following Christ in holiness, it is also a source of virtues and a school of spiritual formation.

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<sup>1</sup> See *Codex Iuris Canonici auctoritate Ioannis Pauli PP. II promulgatus* (25.01.1983), AAS 75 (1983), pars II, pp. 1-317 [hereinafter: CIC/83], can. 834 § 1.

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1. THE UNIVERSAL VOCATION  
TO HOLINESS IN THE LIGHT OF THE CULT  
OF THE DIVINE HEART

The first cause and ultimate purpose of man's existence is God who, by establishing a personal relationship with every human being in existence, reveals Himself to man and invites him to unity with Himself.<sup>2</sup> Encountering the Thrice Holy God, man experiences His magnificence and holiness, as well as becomes aware of his own smallness: "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" (Lk 5:8). God, however, shows His love for man by sending His Son who, through His death, restores man's lost dignity as a child of God and bestows grace on him (cf. Rom 5:8). Moreover, man is also invited to participate in God's holiness: "Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy!" (Lev 19:2). This invitation is read by the community of the Church as a universal call to holiness, which summarises man's ultimate goal, regardless of his vocation, social status or background. God the Father "calls us to holiness" (cf. 1 Thess 4:7), washes us in the water of baptism, sanctifies and justifies us in His Son, Jesus Christ, and through the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 1:30; 6:11), so that the name of Jesus Christ may be hallowed in us and our lives may bring glory to Him.<sup>3</sup>

An important help in the pursuit of perfection are the various forms of piety, aimed at shaping man's heart in its proper relation to God, the growth of the theological and moral virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit [Chmielewski 2002, 641]. One such form is the cult of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, which explicitly directs man to the love of God, shown – on the basis of the hypostatic union (two natures united in one person) – in the symbol of the Heart of Jesus. As the *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy* reminds us, "the expression 'Heart of Jesus' signifies the mystery of Christ in general, His whole being, His Person understood in the deepest and most essential way: the Son of God, Eternal Wisdom, Infinite Love, Source of salvation and sanctification of all humanity. The 'Heart of Jesus' is Christ, the saving Word Incarnate, essentially united in the Holy Spirit to the infinite divine-human love for the Father and for people as His

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<sup>2</sup> See *Catechismus Catholicae Ecclesiae*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano 1997 [hereinafter: CCE], no. 34-35.

<sup>3</sup> See CIC/83, can. 834 § 1; CCE 2813.

brothers.”<sup>4</sup> The above explanation is extremely important because it dispels the accusations often levelled against this form of devotion of alleged excessive emotionalism and tenderness. The centre of devotion to the Sacred Heart occupies God’s love, which is personified by the Incarnate Word of the Father – Jesus Christ. Worshipping the Sacred Heart of Jesus, we glorify the Second Person of God and the Most Holy Trinity for the love with which God has loved us in Jesus Christ [Amenós 1998, 377]. Worshipping the Heart of the Saviour, we always see in it the Person of Jesus Christ, who has loved us with both human and divine love.<sup>5</sup>

The pedagogical and sanctifying dimension of this worship is indicated by Jesus Himself, who addresses His disciples with the encouragement: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matt 11:28-30). This is the only text in which Christ speaks of His Heart. He, the Divine Teacher, invites all the burdened and afflicted to learn to follow His example, whose Heart is gentle and humble. St. John Paul II emphasised that Jesus’ words “learn from me” mean “that He Himself is our Teacher, our Master. Not only by all that He did and said. He is our Teacher and Master above all by who He was. And who Jesus Christ was – is expressed in a special way in His Heart. [...] ‘No one knows the Son except the Father,’ says Jesus (Matt 11:27). And at the

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<sup>4</sup> Congregazione per il Culto Divino e la Disciplina dei Sacramenti, *Direttorio su pietà popolare e liturgia. Principi e orientamenti*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano 2002, no. 166. See also Jan Paweł II, *Kiedy mówimy: „Serce Jezusa Chrystusa...”*. *Homilia podczas Mszy św. na lotnisku w Vancouver w Kanadzie* (18 September 1984), in: *Serce Jezusa w dokumentach Kościoła. Dokumenty Magisterium Kościoła o Najświętszym Sercu Pana Jezusa od Klemensa XIII do Benedykta XVI*, ed. L. Poleszak, Wydawnictwo Księży Sercanów „Dehon”, Kraków 2006 [hereinafter: SJwDK], pp. 257-60.

<sup>5</sup> Already in the bull *Auctorem fidei*, Pius VI defends the cult of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, specifying its material object: “The sentence which asserts that ‘to adore directly the Humanity of Christ, much less any part of it, will always be a veneration paid to the creature’, insofar as the word ‘directly’ implies a condemnation of the cult of adoration which the faithful direct to the Humanity of Christ, as if such adoration, which is received by the Humanity and even the life-giving Body of Christ – admittedly not on account of itself as a body, but as united to the Deity – would be a divine veneration given to creation, rather than one and the same veneration given to the Incarnate Word with His own body, [such a sentence] is false, misleading, derogatory and insulting to the due veneration which the faithful give and ought to give to the Humanity of Christ.” Pius VI, Bolla *Auctorem fidei* (28.08.1794); in: SJwDK, p. 31.

same time, ‘anyone who has seen the Son has seen the Father’ (cf. John 14:9), for only ‘the Son knows the Father’ (cf. Matt 11:27). [...] Thus the key to our knowledge of God is Christ – the Son of God and the Son of Man, and at the centre of this knowledge lies the Heart.”<sup>6</sup>

The encouragement to follow Jesus, to listen to His words, to imitate His attitudes and values, is motivated by the love and gentleness that permeate His Person, pouring into the hearts of the disciples peace and the expected consolation: “learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Matt 11:29). The gentleness and humbleness of the Heart of Jesus indicated as a motive to follow Him are surprising. However, they make it possible for the human heart to understand the way of the Son of God, who is particularly sensitive to the poor and the simple-hearted, and to come to Him, because He alone is the way, the truth and the life (cf. John 14:6). What is particularly worthy of imitation in Jesus setting Himself as an example for us is His filial attitude towards the Father, which is the core and reason for all His activity aimed at the sanctification and salvation of man. From this gaze towards the Father, Jesus draws all that He gives to people and all that He does. The gentle and humble Heart of Jesus also defines the style in which He undertakes the mission received from the Father, aimed at transforming human life through love, which is the essence of His mission. The love that flows from the Heart of Jesus is the only one capable of transforming the difficult situations of life, of freeing people from various enslavements, of opening up prospects for a future in which they can live in the fullness of humanity. It is thus easy to see that the gentle and humble love of Jesus is not some secondary feature of His Person, but is the core of the salvific activity of the Son of God. However, the serenity that comes from imitating the Saviour’s gentle and humble Heart does not imply a lack of action and dynamism, but presupposes entering upon a path of transformation that finds its goal and fulfilment in Christ, who alone can fill and satisfy the desire of the human heart. It is, therefore, a matter of entering into the dynamism of grace that transforms the human soul, embarking on a spiritual path characterised by the fervour of fiery love and feeding at the very source, which is the love of Jesus. The rest promised by Jesus

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<sup>6</sup> John Paul II, *Let no one get rich at the expense of his neighbour. Homily delivered during the Mass celebrated at the OSIR stadium in Płock (07.06.1991)*, in: SJwDK, p. 402.

thus does not denote some emptiness or idleness after a hard day's work, but the fullness of an intimate life with God who, while accepting man's poverty and misery, wishes to fill him with a new strength and fullness that comes from the perfection of His divine and human nature. "Come to me" also means that only the Son of God is able to satisfy the desire of the human heart and its expectations and to ultimately bring humanity to a union with God [Galot 2003, 99-102].

## 2. THE HEART OF JESUS – THE SOURCE OF LOVE AND HOLINESS

Faith in Christ, who by revealing His Heart to us points to His love, makes a person a child of God. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states that this assumed sonship transforms man and motivates him to follow the example of Jesus, empowers him to act righteously and do good. In this way, by uniting himself ever more closely to the Saviour, man perfects himself in love, that is, attains holiness.<sup>7</sup> Thus, since holiness is defined by the Catechism as perfect love, it becomes obvious that the cult of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, whose most essential task and goal is to discover God's love for man and to respond to that love, is an important aid to man's sanctification. This fact is emphasised by many documents of the Teaching Office of the Church, defining this form of devotion as a summary of the entire Catholic religion.<sup>8</sup> Pointing to Christ as the source of love, Pius XII describes the cult of the Sacred Heart as "perfectly harmonised with the essence of Christianity, which is a religion of love",<sup>9</sup> while Leo XIII calls it a "tried and tested form of piety".<sup>10</sup>

The sanctification of man is closely linked to the fundamental element of the worship of the Divine Heart, which is the knowledge of Jesus and

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<sup>7</sup> See CCE 1709.

<sup>8</sup> See Pius XI, *Litterae encyclicae de communi expiatione Sacratissimo Cordi Iesu debita Miserentissimus Redemptor* (08.05.1928), AAS 20 (1928), pp. 165-78 [hereinafter: MR], no. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Pius XII, *Litterae encyclicae Haurietis aquas* (15.05.1956), *Discorsi e Radiomessaggi di Sua Santità Pio XII*, Vol. 18, IV,2, in: SJwDK, p. 158.

<sup>10</sup> Leo XIII, *Litterae encyclicae de hominibus Sacratissimo Cordi Iesu devovendis Annum sacrum* (25.05.1899), ASS 31 (1898-1899), Introduction, in: SJwDK, p. 39. See Poleszak 2006, 10-21.

the discovery of His love. Through the union of the divine and human natures in Christ, through contemplation of the Saviour's Heart, man can discover the infinite love of God of which it is the image. This image speaks in a special way to the heart of man through the sign of the wounded and glorious Heart of Jesus. The truth of God's love slowly penetrates the consciousness of the disciple who can claim with increasing conviction like St. John the Apostle: "And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them" (1 John 4:16).

Learning the inner nature of the Heart of Jesus, man touches upon His holiness and love, learns His virtues and inner desires. A great help in this is undoubtedly provided by reading Sacred Scripture or meditating on particular mysteries from the life of Christ the Lord. Such a form of spiritual development was recommended, for example, by St. Józef Sebastian Pelczar, who claimed that in this way, from the deepening knowledge of Jesus in man, an inner reverence is also born which expresses itself in the form of feelings and acts of will leading to adoration, thanksgiving, love and compensation. The love that grows in the heart of man deepens his Christian spirituality, which bears fruit in the form of keeping the commandments, fulfilling the duties according to one's state, watching over oneself and avoiding the evil. Pelczar wrote, "If one wishes to imitate the Heart of Jesus, one must first of all purify one's heart of sins, of disordered attachments, of superfluous desires and of earthly bustle. As a means of doing this, one must frequently and worthily partake of the holy sacraments, daily examination of conscience, constant vigilance, persevering work and fervent prayer. One must often cry out with the Prophet: 'Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me' (Ps 51:12), then again to pray with St. Gertrude, especially after Holy Communion: 'O Lord Jesus, take my heart, and give me your Heart'" [Pelczar 2015, 291]. The Heart of Jesus thus becomes for man an open book of love of God and of all people. By delving into this book – especially through the Bible – God's call reaches the human heart: "My son, give me your heart and let your eyes delight in my ways" (Prov 23:26) [Król 2006, 233-36].

A unique place and school of the spirituality of the Divine Heart is the Eucharist. The Heart of the Saviour, beating therein, bestows His love on man and gives Himself to man unreservedly, becoming living food for him. "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this

bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world” (John 6:51). By partaking of this food, man unites himself to God in the fullest way. This union gives rise to a deepened faith and love, both in relation to the Creator and bearing the fruit of Christian charity and zeal.

The Eucharistic Heart of Jesus is the model of a life of sacrifice and selfless love that gives itself away in its entirety. The Heart of Jesus, by giving itself as a sacrifice to atone for human sins, teaches not only the necessity of compensation for sin, but also selflessness and zeal in self-giving. The Venerable Servant of God Fr Léon Dehon stated that whoever wants to be a true friend of the Sacred Heart of Jesus should reject every form of selfishness. “Everything should be love and belovedness,” he wrote, “for we should forget ourselves in order to live only by the Heart of Jesus, which is after all sweetness and mercy itself. When love has become firmly established in our hearts, we will think of only one thing: to transform ourselves into a fragrance of gratitude and thanksgiving. Our only desire will be to become a living Eucharist of the Heart of Jesus, as the Divine Heart itself is” [Dehon 2018, 168; Martínez-Gayol Fernández 2012, 431-93].

Through His atonement offered to the Father, Jesus invites His followers to participate in His recompense for every ingratitude and sin. In a strict sense, the one who makes amends is Jesus Himself, who, in an act of obedience to the Father and in His readiness to do His will (cf. Heb 10:5-7), by offering His life, brings salvation to men and is the perfect expiatory sacrifice. St. Paul the Apostle says in his Epistle to the Romans: “Consequently, just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous” (Rom 5:18-19). Jesus’ recompense therefore also includes the reality of the gift of love with which He Himself is loved by the Father. Jesus offers all that He Himself is, just as He Himself has been given by the Father. When we delve into the compensatory spirituality that is an essential feature of the spirituality of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, we come to the conclusion that it is the Father’s ineffable love itself, which is manifested in Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit, through His Incarnation, passion, death, piercing of His side and glorification, that is essentially a compensatory love. This is indicated, for example, by Jesus’ words to Nic-

odemus: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (John 3:16-17). To this work of compensation Christ invites every human being. Although His recompense lacked nothing and was completely fulfilled in Him as Head, His sufferings are still completed in His members, as He Himself points out when He addresses Saul at Damascus: “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting” (Acts 9:5). In his encyclical *Miserentissimus Redemptor*, Pius XI draws from this the conclusion that compensation is the duty of every man.<sup>11</sup> “Christ, still suffering in his Mystical Body, desires to have us as companions in His expiation, as our union with Him requires, since we are ‘the body of Christ and its individual members’ (1 Cor 12:26), and so it falls to the members to suffer just as the head does (cf. 1 Cor 12:26)” (MR 7).<sup>12</sup> We can say, then, that the compensation to which Jesus invites us involves first and foremost accepting God’s love and responding to that love with our own love, uniting ourselves to Him – especially in the sacrament of the Eucharist, avoiding sin, offering our lives with Jesus to the Father and practically cherishing the commandment to love God and our neighbour.

### 3. THE HEART OF JESUS AS A SOURCE OF VIRTUE AND A SCHOOL OF SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Properly cultivated, the cult of the Sacred Heart of Jesus becomes an essential centre of a person’s spiritual life, while taking into account the vocation path one has chosen. It makes a key contribution to the development of Christian maturity by deepening man’s inner activity and commitment to the life of the Church. For the laymen, consecrated persons and priests, it is a stimulus that inspires a mode of action, apostolate and mission characteristic of their state of life. By shaping the spiritual life of individuals, this worship contributes to the development of love and brings closer the reign of the kingdom of love of the Heart of Jesus. The

<sup>11</sup> See MR, Introduction.

<sup>12</sup> The theology of recompense is extensively discussed, for instance, in: Martínez-Gayol Fernández, Fernández Cordero, Cordovilla Pérez, et al. 2012.



daily prayer *Our Father* reminds us of this. Calling out: “Sacred Heart of Jesus, Thy kingdom come”, man is at the same time invited to join in its construction on a daily basis: both in the spiritual dimension – the development of God’s love deposited in man’s heart at the time of his baptismal consecration – and in the social dimension – the building of a society based on principles that fully respect the dignity of the human person and his rights, that is, the building of a civilisation of life, as the Master Himself did.<sup>13</sup>

For the Christian, the Heart of Jesus is a model of virtues, the practice and imitation of which leads to a profound union with God. Among these, the first is love, the source of which is God Himself. “Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love” (1 John 4:7-8). Jesus teaches His followers above all the virtue of love and sets Himself as a model in cultivating it: “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another” (John 13:34). Christ’s love becomes a distinguishing mark for His followers – a sign indicating membership in the circle of His disciples: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35). Perfecting oneself in love leads to the purification of a person’s heart and empowers them to see God face to face. This is explained by Pope Francis in his encyclical *Gaudete et exsultate*: “When the heart loves God and neighbour (cf. Matt 22:36-40), when this is its true intention and not empty words, then this heart is pure and can see God. St. Paul, in his Hymn on Love, says that ‘For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror’ (1 Cor 13:12), but to the extent that love truly prevails, we will be able to see ‘face to face’ (ibid.). Jesus promises that those who have a pure heart ‘will see God’. Keeping the heart pure from everything that stains love is holiness.”<sup>14</sup>

The Heart of Jesus, which we invoke in the litany as “the bottomless depth of all virtues”, leads man into the very centre of the Most Holy Trinity. When we worship the Incarnate Word, we do so always in relation to the Father and in the Holy Spirit, who makes our worship of God perfect.

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<sup>13</sup> See John Paul II, *Thy Kingdom come. General Audience. Words addressed to the Poles* (10.06.1988), in: SJwDK, pp. 345-46.

<sup>14</sup> Francis, *Adhortatio apostolica de vocatione ad sanctitatem in mundo huius temporis Gaudete et exsultate* (19.03.2018), Libreria Editrice Vaticana 2018, no. 86.

Jesus is “the image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15). In him we perceive all the virtues of God, “for in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form” (Col 2:9). Contemplating the virtues of the Sacred Heart of the Saviour, we recognize in them the immensity of God’s glory, which is poured out into the world in the Person of the Son. It is to this Son that the Church attributes the words recorded in the Book of Proverbs: “I, wisdom, dwell together with prudence; I possess knowledge and discretion [...] Counsel and sound judgment are mine; I have insight, I have power” (Prov 8:12.14) [Radliński 2023]. The contemplation of the Incarnate Word and His qualities, which have become close to us by virtue of the fact that He has become for us Emmanuel – God with us, then results in the desire to imitate the virtues of the Divine Master. The encouragement of Christ, who is “the power of God and the Wisdom of God” (1 Cor 1:24), to imitate Him and learn from Him, thus echoes the Old Testament call of Divine Wisdom in the Book of Proverbs: “Now then, my children, listen to me; blessed are those who keep my ways” (Prov 8:32). An elaboration of this teaching can be found, among others, in the whole teaching of the Divine Master, especially in His teaching on the Beatitudes delivered in the Sermon on the Mount (cf. Matt 5:1-12). Following the path of perfection marked out and proposed by Jesus develops goodness in man, strengthens faith, fuels love and kindles hope, which confidently allows one to look forward to a union with the Divine Heart of the Saviour, which constitutes man’s greatest happiness and the fulfilment of his desires.

## CONCLUSION

The role of the cult to the Sacred Heart of Jesus in the pursuit of holiness discussed in this study leads us to some important conclusions. The pursuit of holiness stems from God’s desire for all people to be saved. In spite of man’s sinfulness, God continually invites him to embark on the path of striving for holiness and gives him a model in the person of His Son – the Incarnate Word of the Father – Jesus Christ. Jesus becomes the teacher and model of holiness. He invites man to become His disciple and to imitate Him in His way of approaching His Father.

The cult of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, through its pedagogical qualities, shows man the goal and the way to pursue it. The goal is holiness and its

model is God Himself. The way to be pursued is the gentle and humble way of the Son of God, who, by encouraging to imitate His virtues, becomes Himself the Way leading to the Father. The love of God, which is the essence of this worship, is at the heart of holiness. This same love simultaneously points to the significant role that this worship plays in the pursuit of holiness.

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**The Role of the Cult of the Sacred Heart of Jesus  
in the Pursuit of Holiness**

Abstract

The first cause and ultimate goal of human's existence is God, who invites man to unity with Godself and to participate in God's holiness. This invitation is called the universal call to holiness. One of the means helpful in realizing the pursuit of holiness is the cult of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the aim of which is to discover God's love for man and to respond to this love. The aim of the article is to indicate the pedagogical content of the cult of the Sacred Heart, aimed at the sanctification of man and his union with God.

**Keywords:** Heart of Jesus; cult of the Sacred Heart of Jesus; holiness; vocation to holiness.

**Rola kultu Najświętszego Serca Jezusowego w dążeniu do świętości**

Abstrakt

Pierwszą przyczyną i ostatecznym celem istnienia człowieka jest Bóg, który zaprasza go do jedności z sobą i do uczestnictwa w Jego świętości. Zaproszenie to jest nazywane powszechnym powołaniem do świętości. Jednym ze środków pomocnych w realizacji dążenia do świętości jest kult Najświętszego Serca Jezusowego, którego celem jest odkrycie miłości Boga do człowieka i odpowiedź na tę miłość. Celem artykułu jest wskazanie na pedagogiczne treści kultu Bożego Serca zmierzające do uświęcenia człowieka i jego zjednoczenia z Bogiem.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Serce Jezusa; kult Najświętszego Serca Jezusowego; świętość; powołanie do świętości.

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