

Solemnity of the Sacred Heart – June 23, 2017 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.  
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Alabama – 12:10pm Mass – 750 words

*Adapted from a homily by Fr. Lawrence Lew, O.P. - <http://lawrenceop.tumblr.com/post/162155759994/homily-for-the-sacred-heart-of-jesus-deut-76-11>*

God is love. God loves you and me. Many of us, I hope, have heard this since we were children. But maybe we have become so accustomed to hearing this that it just flows off the tongue without much pause for reflection. Today's Solemnity calls us to pause, then, and to look at the Sacred Heart of Jesus, symbol of God's burning love for humanity. God loves us so much that he became man in order to save us from our sins; moreover, he was wounded for our sakes, taking upon himself the deadly effects of sin.

Some people today think that all religion is about love, so the Christian message is not all that special. But this kind of thinking is only possible in a post-Christian world. Ask a pre-Christian Greek or Roman what religion was about, and they would have said: placating the gods, keeping them happy through rituals, winning their favor. And some people today, even those who think they're Christian, are still influenced by such pagan ideas. Or ask a Buddhist what religion is about and he might say compassion, transcending suffering through meditation, and so forth. Or Islam, as we know, means submission to God's will, through which one finds peace.

But none of these religions would dare to say what Christians believe and profess; indeed, they find the Christian message odd, if not offensive. For we say that God is love, and so, God became Man. God, in his compassion for sinful and fallen humanity, comes to our rescue in the person of Jesus Christ. Thus, in Christ, we pass through death and suffering by being united to him through grace, which comes principally from the sacraments. In Christ, God – not man – submits himself to the creaturely order and dies on a Cross in order to become our source of peace. And because of that Cross, man doesn't need to win God's favor but rather, God demonstrates his great love for us, and seeks, so to speak, to win our favor!

Thus we see that the Christian message is so much different from what people customarily thought religion was about. Today's Solemnity arrests our attention, calling us to look again and see the effects of God's radical love. To excite our love toward God, there was no more powerful way than that the Word of God, through whom all things were made, should assume our human nature in order to restore it. St. Thomas Aquinas teaches in this regard:

[Man's] intellect and affections are weighed down towards bodily things [and] cannot easily turn to things that are above himself. It is easy for us to know and love [other human beings], but to think of the divine highness and be carried to it by the proper affection of love is not for everyone, but only for those who, by God's help and with great effort and labor, are lifted up from bodily to spiritual things. Therefore, to open the way to God for everyone, God willed to become man, so that even children could know and love God as someone like themselves; and so, by [means of] what they can grasp, they can progress little by little to perfection.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore: God is love, and so, God loves you and me. Thus, God became man to demonstrate his love for us. But this is only half the story. For what is crucial is our response. For it is by loving him, and loving him above all created things, that we are saved. Today's Solemnity was established in order to make reparation to Christ for the indifference of so many people to God's love. Today's feast invites us to pause, reflect on our response to God's love, and love Jesus more.

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<sup>1</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *De rationibus fidei contra Saracenos, Graecos et Armenos ad Cantorem Antiochenum*, chapter 5.

Hence it is that the image of the Sacred Heart often points with one hand to his wounded heart, showing us the depths of God's love for humanity – but his other hand is open, waiting to receive our love. Our love for God is not an emotion that we stir up in ourselves, nor is it something we guiltily pretend to do. Rather, love for God is brought about by God's grace. Let us seek to live and grow in that grace each day, and each day also turn to God with humble and contrite hearts, opening our wounded hearts to him. Let us, so to speak, ask him for a heart transplant: "Jesus, meek and humble of heart, make my heart like unto thine!"