

The Heart of Joseph: A Synthesized Theology, History, and Devotion

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St. Joseph, husband of the Immaculate Mother of God and virginal father¹ of Jesus Christ, exceeds all creatures in holiness excepting his wife,² and is rightly proclaimed by Bl. Pius IX as “Patron of the Universal Church.”³ He appropriately receives the unique devotion of *protodulia*, as first among the saints and subordinate to the *hyperdulia*, which is exclusive to Mary, the Immaculate Co-redemptrix and spiritual Mother of all peoples. Both *hyperdulia* and *protodulia* fall infinitely below the *latria* attributed only to God and to the God-man, Jesus Christ.⁴

The rich history of Catholic Spirituality gradually developed the specific devotions to the Sacred “Heart” of Jesus⁵ and the Immaculate “Heart” of Mary,⁶ accurately revered on

¹ See Augustine, *Sermon* 51. In 1906 St. Pius X, approved an indulgenced prayer invoking St. Joseph as “virgin father of Jesus” (*virgo pater Jesu*): see Francis L. Filas, S.J., *Joseph and Jesus: A Theological Study of Their Relationship* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing, 1952), 4 and 119. See also John Paul II, apostolic exhortation, *Redemptoris Custos* (August 15, 1989), no. 20. For a summary of sources supporting St. Joseph as a virginal father going back to St. Augustine, see Donald H. Calloway, MIC, *Consecration to St. Joseph: The Wonders of Our Spiritual Father* (Stockbridge, MA: Marian Press, 2020), 134–136.

² Leo XIII, encyclical, *Quamquam Pluries* (Aug. 15, 1889), no. 3.

³ Bl. Pius IX, Declaration of Dec. 8, 1870: *Acta Sanctae Sedis* 2, 193.

⁴ See St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 103, a. 3 and 4; III, Q. 325, a. 5.

⁵ See Pope Francis, encyclical, *Dilexit Nos* (October 24, 2024) and Timothy O’Donnell, *Heart of the Redeemer* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989 and 2018).

⁶ For example, St. John Eudes, *The Admirable Heart of Mary*, (Loretto Publications, 2008); the Message of Fatima, cf. *Documents on Fatima and the Memoirs of Sr. Lucia*, Father Anotonio Maria Martins, S.J., originally published in Portuguese, 1984, English Publication, Fatima Family Apostolate, South Dakota, 1992; Bertrand de Margerie, S.J., *Heart of Mary*,

their respective levels of *latria* and *hyperdulia*. The contemporary question remains: *is it theologically acceptable to have devotion to the pure and chaste “Heart” of St. Joseph on the fitting level of protodulia?* Let us begin with a theological examination of the term, “heart” as it is used biblically and anthropologically.

Scripturally, the word “heart” indicates far more than just a body part. “Heart” signifies the core of the person, his or her “inner self,” and in some cases represents the entirety of the person in question. The term *heart* represents the fullness of the human being, the seat of the faculties of the soul, which, along with being the source of his desires and emotions, also include the higher faculties of the human soul, that is, the human person’s capacity to think, as exercised through the intellect, and his or her ability to love, as manifest through the will. As Timothy O’Donnell notes:

The heart is the spiritual center of man’s soul, the core of all his volitional and emotional and intellectual activity. It therefore represents the whole person...this symbolic understanding of the heart as the “center of man” has a firm foundation in scripture. It is in fact the most important and most frequent word in Old Testament anthropology. *Leb* and *lebab* occur over 858 times in the Old Testament...In semitic thought, it signifies the entire inner life of the person.⁷

New Testament references to “heart” continue the same meaning as the Greek denotations of *kardia*, *koilia* and *splancha*, as the true directive source from which a human

Heart of the Church: A Theological Synthesis (New Jersey, AMI Press, 1991), pp. 1-44.

⁷ Timothy O’Donnell, *Heart of the Redeemer*, (San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 2018), 3.; Aerled Watkins, *The Heart of the World*, (London, Burns and Oates, 1954), p. 6; Malatesta and Solano, *The Heart of Christ and the Heart of Man*, (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University, 1978), p. 2; J. MacKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible*, (Milwaukee, Bruce Publishing, 1965)p. 343.

being derives thoughts, feelings, and his very self.⁸ It is, in fact with the image of the heart that Jesus Christ reveals himself in expressions such as “My heart goes out to my people” (Mt. 15:32) and “Come to me all you who labor and are overburdened, take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart” (Mt. 11:28).⁹

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger confirms here the centrality of the heart and its appropriateness in Christian piety:

All of this comes to show that Christian piety must involve the senses, which receive their order and unity from the heart, and also the feelings, which have their seat in the heart. It is clear that such piety, centered in the heart, corresponds to the image of the Christian God, who has a heart.¹⁰

Therefore, when we discuss devotion to the “heart” of someone, we mean something well beyond only a physical organ, but rather the source of who he or she is in their very being, in an expression—all that a person is and all that a person does. In the Western world, a human person often thinks of himself or herself as a “mind,” perhaps due to the post-enlightenment rationalism; but in Eastern cultures, as in Scripture, a human being is more typically described as a “heart.”

In short, *heart* signifies *person*.

This is why in traditional Catholic devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the adoration given to his physical heart of Jesus goes beyond his physical organ and ultimately reaches his very divine Person. In the great mystery of his Eucharistic

⁸ Ibid, p. 36. Cf. Hugo Rahner, *Heart of the Savior*, J. Stierli, ed (New York, Herder Publishing, 1958), pp. 20-21.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 36-50;

¹⁰ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, “The Paschal Mystery as Core and Foundation of Devotion to the Sacred Heart” in *Towards a Civilization of Love* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985), pp. 156, 159.

Heart, God did not hesitate to unite his Eucharistic presence with the image of his sacred human heart.

Following the great model of St. John Eudes and his historic contribution to the theology and devotion to the Hearts of Jesus and Mary, we can further say that we also worship the “spiritual” aspect of Jesus’ Heart, i.e., his human faculties of reason and will, memory and emotions which, hypostatically united to his divine Person, merits our authentic acts of adoring love. We also identify the “divine” aspect of his Sacred Heart, where the human nature experiences the divine nature uniquely in one divine person. This is why the Sacred Heart of Jesus is alone worthy of “*latria*,” in virtue of his sole divinity and his consequent infinite lordship and dominion over all creation.

The Catholic Church also joyfully venerates the Immaculate Heart of Mary. St. John Eudes likewise speaks of these three aspects of Mary’s Heart and why it merits a devotion superior in nature and degree to all other creatures. The physical aspect of Mary’s heart is worthy of our veneration, just as a physical bodily relic of any saint deserves our special respect and devotion in light of its physical unity with a sanctified soul. In Our Lady’s case, this Heart, as part of her physical body, would never experience material corruption due to her Immaculate Conception, which led to Mary’s preservation from Original Sin and all of its effects.

The “spiritual” aspect of Mary’s Heart contained her unparalleled sanctified intellect and will, memory and emotions, in virtue of Our Lady’s unique prerogative of being entirely “full of grace” (Lk. 1:28). St. John Eudes also identifies the “divine” aspect of Mary’s human Heart, not because Mary was herself divine, but rather in light of her fullness of sanctifying grace, which is precisely to participate in the life and the love of the Trinity. Eudes also speaks of

Mary's divine Heart as Jesus living in her.¹¹ The saints excelled in grace, but Mary alone experienced that plenitude of grace, which led to a greater participation by Our Lady in the divine life—a greater divine presence of the Trinity in her Immaculate Heart than any other creature.

The same three elements of physical, spiritual, and even divine aspects present within a human heart may be predicated of the Heart of St. Joseph, albeit on its own distinctly subordinate level to that of the Hearts of Jesus and Mary. The physical dimension of St. Joseph's Heart is most worthy of our devotion, as would any relic of a saint's body, in as much as it housed a soul which, according to the best of Josephite theology and tradition, was pre-sanctified in the womb.¹² Surely, for the greatest saint after Mary, the body of St. Joseph, which was hylemorphically united to his pure and chaste soul, would be deserving of our protodulic veneration.

The heart of St. Joseph also contains its “spiritual” dimension, which was the anthropological source of his extraordinarily “just” (biblically, “righteous”) mind and will, passions, and memory. Certainly, this spiritual core of his exceptional heart which so loved, adored, and protected his divine son, and which at the same time so loved and honored his Immaculate wife, rightfully merits our special respect and veneration, let alone the reciprocal love and devotion his

¹¹ See *Oeuvres Complètes de St. Jean Eudes*, Vol VI, 37–38. These *Oeuvres* were published between 1905 and 1909 in anticipation of John Eudes's beatification. The *Oeuvres Complètes* are now available online at: http://www.doctoratsaintjeaneudes.com/ecrits-de-saint-jean-eudes/oeuvres_complètes/.

OC, Volume VI, pp.37–38

¹² Among those holding to St. Joseph's purification from original sin in the womb are Jean Gerson, Isidoro Isolani, Bernardine of Busti, St. Francis de Sales, St. Alphonsus Liguori, and St. John Henry Newman. See Cardinal A. H.-M. Lépiciér, O.S.M., *Saint Joseph: Époux de la Très Sainte Vierge* (Paris: Lethielleux, 1932), 148; St. Francis de Sales, *Sermon 25 for the Feast of St. Peter*; and St. John Henry Newman, *Meditation for the Triduum of St. Joseph*.

heart received from the Sacred and Immaculate Hearts. Because St. Joseph's life constituted a pre-eminent example of the Christian virtues of purity and chastity, it is most appropriate that these Christian virtues should be showcased and underscored in the heart of one who had the closest external relation to the Hypostatic Union and hence to the Two Great Hearts.

The human Heart of Joseph, moreover, possesses a truly "divine" aspect, in so far as it was a living temple of the divine presence, the indwelling Trinity. It was St. Joseph's heightened and anointed awareness of the Divine Indwelling that sustained his exceptional sanctity and probable preservation from all actual sin.

The most chaste Heart of St. Joseph can thus appropriately be seen as *the signification of his entire person in all its dimensions of sanctification: physical, spiritual and divine*. As legitimate to devotion to the person of St. Joseph is, so too is devotion to his heart, signifying his person. It does not require belief in the bodily assumption of St. Joseph (however acceptable this is as a theological position¹³) to see the legitimacy of devotion to his heart. As in a possible application of the Theology of the Body, the body expresses the person, and in this case, the heart expresses the person.

Devotion to the Heart of St. Joseph came into full display during the late 17th century. The Oratorians in Portugal established it in 1688, and a festival developed honoring the "created Trinity", both under the symbols of the hearts of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, and under that of the Flight into Egypt. The devotion spread to Spain, Italy, France, Germany,

¹³ In his homily of May 26, 1960, St. John XXIII makes reference to Matthew 27:52–53, and he states we can piously believe that St. John the Baptist and St. Joseph had their bodies raised and taken to heaven after the death of Jesus:
https://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/it/homilies/1960/documents/hf_j-xxiii_hom_19600526.html.

Mexico, Brazil, and Burma. The great Josephologist, Fr. Tarcisio Stramare, OSJ (1928–2020), offers this summary:

This festival was very popular in Porto, and Pope Benedict XIV in 1754 had permitted the Oratorians to celebrate it solemnly on the fourth Sunday of April. ... The devotion to the Most Sacred Hearts of the Sovereigns, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, is testified since 1733 by a sanctuary in Porto (Portugal) and a Confraternity in Ouro Preto (Brazil) present in 1785. In Seville (Spain) a Confraternity in 1744 professed Slavery to the Sacred Heart of the most glorious Lord Saint Joseph. Devotion to the Heart of Saint Joseph spread to Mexico in 1747. A Pious Union of the Pure Heart of Saint Joseph was promoted in 1846 by Father Michele Bocco O.M.V., and it spread to Italy, France, Austria, Germany and Burma, reaching 30,000 members.¹⁴

For reasons that remain unexplained, the *cultus* of the heart of St. Joseph was not supported by several late nineteenth century rulings of the Sacred Congregation of Rites. After Bl. Pius IX declared St. Joseph the Patron of the Universal Church in 1870, people began to honor the heart of Joseph with the prayer: “Most pure heart of Joseph pray for us” (*Cor sancti Joseph purissimum, ora pro nobis*). The Bishop of Nantes in France wrote to the Sacred Congregation of Rites to see whether this invocation could be used in non-liturgical functions. The Congregation responded on June 14, 1870

¹⁴ Our translation from Fr. Tarcisio Stramare, OSJ, *San Giuseppe. Dignità, Privilegi, Devozioni*, Editrice Shalom, Camerata Picena (AN) 2008), found on this website:<https://movimentogiuseppino.wordpress.com/devozioni-a-san-giuseppe/>.

letting the Bishop know that “the *cultus* of the heart of St. Joseph is not approved by the Holy See.”¹⁵

A second negative judgment was issued by the Sacred Congregation of Rites on February 19, 1879. The Archbishop of Chambéry was told that medals that show the Heart of St. Joseph along with the Hearts of Jesus and Mary are prohibited.¹⁶

The third prohibition came not from the Sacred Congregation of Rites but the Vicariate of Rome. The editor of *Analecta Ecclesiastica* asked the Vicar of Rome whether images or statues of the Holy Family could be displayed showing the Hearts of the Child Jesus, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and St. Joseph. The response was that it is not expedient with regard to the Hearts of the Child Jesus and the Blessed Virgin, and it is not licit (*non licere*) with regard to the Heart of St. Joseph.¹⁷

In light of the significant history of widespread international devotion to the Heart of St. Joseph by the People of God, how then should these little known and minimally promulgated nineteenth prohibitions be understood?

Because these prohibitions are barely known, it seems they cannot claim to have the force of law in light of the lack of a clear and universal promulgation. St. Thomas Aquinas is correct when he states that a positive law, to have the force of binding law, must be promulgated to its subjects.¹⁸ In fact, the above-mentioned prohibitions to devotion to the Heart of St. Joseph constituted communications of the Sacred

¹⁵ Blaine Burkey, O.F.M. Cap., *Pontificia Josephina* C558 [197-198] in *Cahiers de Joséphologie* 12 (1964) 377-378.

¹⁶ Blaine Burkey, O.F.M. Cap. . *Pontificia Josephina* D45 [263] in *Cahiers de Joséphologie* 17 (1969) 339.

¹⁷ Blaine Burkey, O.F.M. Cap., *Pontificia Josephina* D487 [426-427] in *Cahiers de Joséphologie* 20 (1972) 168-169.

¹⁸ ST, I-II, Q. 90, a. 4.

Congregation of Rites to individual bishops, and—in the case of the 1893 prohibition—a communication of the Vicariate of Rome to a local editor. Beyond the particular research of Msgr. Calkins and a few other French publications, they are generally unknown amidst the international theological community and universal episcopate. This, then, seems to indicate an absence of major concern by the 20th and 21st century Magisterium.

There is also the case of the ecclesiastical law issued under Pope St. John XXIII mandating the use of Latin in all seminary course instruction, which was simply not enforced and hence fell out of practice under the pontificate of St. Paul VI. Clearly, such a Latin law for seminary instruction is in no sense binding today. Even an originally promulgated law which is not practically enforced can lose its binding power.¹⁹

Moreover, St. Alphonsus Liguori, the great master of Moral Theology, teaches that in the case of equal doubt as to the fact of a given law, the conscience is therefore not bound to that particular law.²⁰

There are also several examples of public veneration to the Heart of St. Joseph in sacred art and liturgy which in themselves presuppose ecclesiastical approval. For example,

¹⁹ See John XXIII's apostolic constitution, *Veterum Sapientia* (Feb. 22, 1962):

https://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/la/apost_constitutions/1962/documents/hf_j-xxiii_apc_19620222_veterum-sapientia.html.

https://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/la/apost_constitutions/1962/documents/hf_j-xxiii_apc_19620222_veterum-sapientia.html. John

XXIII's requirement for seminary classes to be taught in Latin was not continued by Paul VI, who, in his Nov. 4, 1963 apostolic letter, *Summi Dei Verbum*, directed seminarians to acquire an adequate knowledge of Latin without mentioning the need for classes to be taught in Latin:

https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_letters/documents/hf_p-vi_apl_19631104_summi-dei-verbum.html

²⁰ See Dominic M. Prümmer, *Handbook of Moral Theology*, translated by Rev. Gerald W. Shelton (Ft. Collins, CO: Roman Catholic Books, 1957), no. 153, p.65.

in the great Polish Shrine of the Mediatrix of all Graces in Niepokalanow, a minor basilica in Poland, there is an icon of the Heart of St. Joseph which rests on the side altar of St. Joseph, which includes mosaics of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary. This icon is venerated by the Christian faithful, and on occasion brought to the homes of parishioners. Further, Bishop Gerard Battersby of the Diocese of La Crosse, Wisconsin has as part of his episcopal coat of arms the images of the “Three Hearts,” the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the Immaculate Heart of Mary, and the pure Heart of St. Joseph.²¹

We therefore arrive at the following conclusions:

1. In light of the sound biblical theology whereby “heart” signifies the entirety of the person as well as the inner self, devotion to St. Joseph’s heart ultimately constitutes devotion to the person of St. Joseph and his pre-eminent sanctity, which is second in degree only to Our Lady.
2. While we should always be obedient to legitimate Church authority, it is doubtful that the remote 19th century curial prohibitions of devotion to the Heart of St. Joseph are still binding. The lack of any clear ecclesiastical confirmation of these 19th century prohibitions into the 20th and 21st centuries seems to remove any obligation to follow them in contemporary Church faith and practice.
3. A balanced devotion of *protodulia* to the Heart of St. Joseph, with proper distinctions as to its unquestionable subordination to the proper latrial devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the hyperdulial devotion to the Immaculate Heart of

²¹ Bishop Battersby’s Coat of Arms can be found here: <https://diolc.org/communications/our-bishops-2/bishop-battersby/>.

Mary would appropriately serve a unified devotion to the Three Hearts who have immediate relation to the hypostatic order. Thus, it would serve the truth of and devotion to the Holy Family under the personal signification of their respective hearts.