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# Pope Francis and the Revolution of Tenderness – a New Chance for the Sacred Heart?

Stefan Tertünte

Only gradually, theologians have begun to analyse the Magisterium of Pope Francis. This applies to individual aspects as well as to his «theological program»<sup>1</sup>. For many, especially European theologians, the pastoral language of Francis was considered to be of little relevance to theology, but more and more his theological roots are emerging and a theological architecture which consistently defines him as the first pope of the post-modern age. In my contribution, I would like to draw attention to some basic reformulations that make the language of the Heart of Jesus, even the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, in a new way plausible. In this, I am inspired by the works of Marcello Neri,<sup>2</sup> one of the very few theologians to think of the Sacred Heart in contemporary theological patterns.

## *Towards a new style of theology*

A few years ago, in his book *Mercy*, Walter Kasper, though with cautious words, pointed out the limitations of classical theology, which relied more on metaphysical reflection than on the historical self-revelation of God.<sup>3</sup> Such a theology of a perfect God, a *movens immobile*, has not been able to fully develop the idea that God exists only in relationship, in a passionate relationship

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Kurt Appel/Jakob Helmut Deibl (ed.), *Barmherzigkeit und zärtliche Liebe. Das theologische Programm von Papst Franziskus*, Freiburg i. Br. 2016; the book series «La teologia di papa Francesco», Città del Vaticano 2017ss, with contributions from Jürgen Werbick, Peter Hünermann, Juan Carlos Scannone; Maurizio Gronchi/Pierangelo Sequeri (ed.), *I semici teologici di Francesco*, 11 Bde, Rom 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Marcello Neri, *Gesù. Affetti e corporeità di Dio. Il cuore e la fede*, Assisi 2007; id., *Giustizia della misericordia. Europa, cristianesimo e spiritualità dehoniana*, Bologna 2016; id., *Il cuore di Gesù negli scritti di Tommaso da Olera. Una singolare esperienza di agape*, in: Rodolfo Saltarin (ed.), *Tommaso da Olera. Totus ardens*, Brescia 2018, 73–115.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Kasper, *Mercy: The essence of the Gospel and the key to christian life*, Mahwah, NJ 2014.

with man. This becomes even more clear in Pope Francis' preaching and writing, and that is a major controversial point and identity marker: God comes to his being not only in love, but in being loved, in the answer of man, his conversion, his love of God. Francis discovers, experiences and communicates such a God in the devotional language of the Heart of Jesus.

According to Marcello Neri, Sacred Heart devotion becomes, so to speak, the guardian of the affectivity and corporeality of God. It can thus be regarded as a contribution to hold up the humanity of Jesus and the concreteness of the revelation of God. The earthly presence of Jesus of Nazareth in the concretion of his gestures and passions is the place of the revelation of God and of his being. In the life of Jesus, we recognize the life of God. The old question «What must I do» is replaced by «How should I love?»<sup>4</sup>

In *Evangelii Gaudium* 231–233, Francis formulates a principle full of implications for theology: «Reality is more important than the idea.»<sup>5</sup> This principle is also the rejection of a theology that was guided in its talk of God and of faith by an idea, by static supposed truths, by systems operating within self-contained systems, and in the neo-scholastic tradition of God.

While for a long time Sacred Heart devotion stood for life in a parallel ecclesial world, a symbol even of the claim of a temporal rule of Catholicism on political forms of human coexistence, Pope Francis returns the Sacred Heart devotion to faith, to concrete people living in concrete times. The Heart of Jesus is no longer simply a symbol of love, which is God. The Heart of Jesus becomes the symbol of a style, of God's being with and in favour of the wounded and wounding humans.

Devotion understood in its ritual expressions and in its emotional implications is one of those practices – at the same time within and at the margins of the institution of faith – which throughout history has shown the highest measure of ecclesial sensitivity to time and to the epochal transitions of the fate of faith.

What is new in the gesture of Francis is his view of the devotion as a fundamental reference point of that transition which impacts the Catholic Church in the globalized context of the present.

At this point, a brief but important comment has to be said concerning the theology of the people as part of the theological sources of Pope Francis. He and others were a part of what became an Argentine branch of Liberation Theology. It resisted the temptation to be engulfed by a dialectical ideology of class struggle and found strong relevance in the 2007 Latin American Episcopate document developed in Aparecida. Bergoglio, it is known, led the drafting group. The people of God became the subject of evangelization, became the theological place, the

<sup>4</sup> Marcello Neri, *Giustizia della misericordia*, Bologna 2016, 66ss.

<sup>5</sup> Papa Francesco, *Esortazione Apostolica Evangelii Gaudium. Sull'annuncio del Vangelo nel mondo di oggi*, Roma 2013.

place where faith is learned. In particular, it is the «mysticism of the common people» to which refers *Evangelii Gaudium* in accordance with Aparecida.

From this arises an understanding of the Church in which reference to the factuality of faith, to lived faith, is constitutive for the institution itself. This is certainly one of the theological focal points around which Francis' action and preaching are articulated.

Faithfulness to the destination of spiritual experience is thus not realized as the formal immutability of a repertoire of statements, which has always been decided a priori.<sup>1</sup> It is more about the precariousness of a life history, which, in the contingency of its acts, seeks to concretize the original participation in the faith of Jesus, in a particular style of being in the world and to move in concrete times.

In this way, the actuality of life does not merely represent the field of application of generative, but ultimately of external experience. It becomes the form in which the real proximity of God to man is generated in a particular place and time to realize the desire of God's contemporaneity with every form of human being and living in the world.

A structural reform of the Church without the prior strengthening of the spiritual intelligence of all believers about the time in which they are living, in Francis' view, would be a formal gesture without permanency and without a real rooting in the factuality of the faith. You can read devotions in many ways, but for our purpose it is important to realize that devotion is always an exercise of spiritual intelligence of the current times by the faithful.

Devotion to the Sacred Heart is a theological source borrowed by Francis from popular devotion on the one hand, and from the Jesuits' spiritual tradition in reference to the Heart of Jesus, on the other. It is a practice and an image that today have almost completely disappeared from the horizon of the Catholic faith in its Western form and that Francis reevaluates, making the Sacred Heart devotion a central issue for the theology of faith in the current context of the world.

### *Devotion, affection, tenderness, excess*

In 2015, at a meeting of priests and religious in Ecuador, Francis gave an example of this spiritual intelligence linked to Sacred Heart devotion. He touched on an extremely problematic figure of devotion, namely, the consecration of the nation to the Sacred Heart. In modern European history, a consecration of a nation to the Sacred Heart of Jesus played a strictly political-social role with all the ambivalences inherent in such a close union of a religious figure with a question of political power.<sup>6</sup> In the present – at least that is the operation

<sup>6</sup> Cf. for this issue Daniele Menozzi, *Sacro Cuore. Un culto tra devozione interiore e restaurazione cristiana della società*, Roma 2001; David Neuhold, *Mission und Kirche, Geld und*

that has set Francis in motion – the space for a radical transformation of that ambivalent connection opens up. This transformation returns the image of the Sacred Heart back to the realm of faith as the experience of a concrete people in a particular place and time, no longer as the universal emblem of a secular domination of Catholicism over the political form of human coexistence.

«Everywhere I go, I receive a really joyful, warm and prayerful welcome; everywhere. But here I see real piety in the way, for example, a blessing is sought [...] There was something quite unique which I also was tempted to ask along with the Bishop of Sucumbios: «What is the recipe of this people?» What is it? I gave this a lot of thought and prayed about it; I asked Jesus several times in prayer: «What is it that is so distinctive about this people?» And this morning, praying about it, I was struck by the consecration to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. I think I should offer this to you as a message from Jesus: all this richness that you have, the spiritual richness of piety and great depth, has come about because of the courage you have shown in very difficult moments when the nation was consecrated to the Heart of Christ, that human and divine Heart which loves us so dearly. And I see you in this sense: divine and human.»<sup>7</sup>

But Francis goes even further in the sense that devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus should challenge the intelligence of faith to a profound revision of the ontological status of God, starting with unconditional self-giving for us and the correlated affections: «...when God is the affection above all our affections... Then we feel happy, even if a little confused, because he thinks of us and above all he loves us! Isn't that impressive?»<sup>8</sup>

This is the theological matrix of his Magistery. «We feel happy, even if a little confused», when we discover that the secret of our desire is the desire of God Himself. And Francis continues asking us: «Are we able to think of God as the caress that keeps us alive, before which there is nothing? A caress from which nothing, not even death, can separate us?»<sup>9</sup> According to Francis we are only here on earth to allow God the desire of his longings and not to humble him at every step in wanting to protect his unchanging honour.

That has consequences for the mission of theology: When one asks in the words of Francis whether the thought of God moves us, astonishes us and touches us inwardly, we ask for a reason, a reason of faith, which is capable to

Nation. Vier Perspektiven auf Léon G. Dehon, Gründer der Herz-Jesu-Priester, Basel/Stuttgart 2019, especially chapter 4: Patria und Nation bei Dehon – Symbole zwischen französischem Sendungsbewusstsein und der Wahrnehmung von Defiziten; Stefan Tertünte, Léon Dehon und die Christliche Demokratie. Ein katholischer Versuch gesellschaftlicher Erneuerung in Frankreich am Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts, Freiburg i. Br. 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Viaggio Apostolico di Sua Santità Francesco in Ecuador, Bolivia e Paraguay (5–13 luglio 2015) – Incontro con il clero, i religiosi, le religiose i seminaristi presso il Santuario «El Quinche» a Quito, 08.07.2015

<sup>8</sup> Pope Francis, General Audience of 26 August 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Pope Francis, General Audience of 26 August 2015.

move on the complex and profound chords of God and his original affectivity. This is about the being of God in the experience of Jesus and testified in the feeling of the body and of the mind. It's about taking distance from a form of thinking about God, which cultivated theology for centuries, by immunizing us against the duty to think of the God of Jesus as an affection of agape, living in a body of flesh and looking for its successful destination.

This is the challenge: work on a comprehension of reason, which at the same time honours the Christological form of the finality of God and proves to be worthy of the people created in freedom and for freedom.

With Francis speaking about God as «affection above all affection», in a similar way he describes the spiritual experience of such a God in terms of «excess of love» or «overflow of love». The unconditional excess means that the absolute love in the free surrender of the Son's flesh is reality in our real life. There is an absolute correlation between the original disposition of God as «excess of love» and his historical destination in the life, in the flesh, in the gift of his Son.

In order to remain in his identity, God must fully agree with this gesture of freedom so that the excess of agape towards man becomes the bond to which God cannot escape. That's the ultimate meaning of the text of the prophet Hosea which Francis quotes so often when he speaks about God's tenderness and the Sacred Heart: «When Israel was a child, I loved him... I led them with cords of kindness, with the bands of love.» Concluding: «The heart of Christ is the tenderness of God.»<sup>10</sup>

The heart of Jesus is the human and real place of that excess, which determines the Christian profile of the name of God. The heart of the faithful becomes the hospitality for love without measure, which reveals the original excess, that is the God of Jesus.

What the Heart of Jesus testifies is this: in the end there is no denial, no negativity that could deny the absolutely real freedom to be forever an unconditional gift. In this way it shows the expectation to which it is capable, so that the original disposition of God's intimacy can be one with the success of the desired destination for all – nobody excluded. The spiritual disposition of faith in the Heart of Jesus is not limited to viewing it as a reality unattainable to man. It has its own freedom in which it exercises an ever deeper access to the ultimate meaning of life, which thus opens and remains forever preserved (within the intimacy of God himself, not just in the life of the world). Penetrating into the open Heart of Jesus means to enter into the ultimate room of love. This is the ultimate excess of love, the definite exteriorisation of agape.

<sup>10</sup> Pope Francis, Homily 12 June 2015.



Thinking about the Heart of Christ is not thinking about a simple figure of devotion, but as the ultimate fulcrum of the revelation of a God who ultimately coincides with his self-sacrifice in favour of man.

It is as if devotion is the way of faith that does not retract in front of a final event of God that coincides perfectly, and forever, with his unconditional gift, on the one hand, and on the other, with the suspension of its successful destination in expectation of hospitality that the intentionality of human freedom can be capable of. Faith as affection, therefore, does not need to rationally resolve the difference between the speculative idea of God, the historical phenomenon that attests to the ultimate meaning of his truth, and the experience in which the concrete relationship with him is individualized.

This does not mean that faith as affection renounces the idea of thinking of and about God, but does so starting from the affectio elaborating a (universally human) rationality that knows how to correspond to its affective nature and that does not dispose of that nature when it is inconvenient. The affectus fidei is about feeling the taste, the joy that God is what it is: the destination of its original intimacy, an excess of agape that is immeasurable, a beating of the heart of the Son in the Trinity's breast for the sensitive experience that God never ceases to make of his own being, his own destination.

I conclude with these words of Pope Francis: «the Gospel tells us constantly to run the risk of a face-to-face encounter with others, with their physical presence which challenges us, with their pain and their pleas, with their joy which infects us in our close and continuous interaction. True faith in the incarnate Son of God is inseparable from self-giving, from membership in the community, from service, from reconciliation with others. The Son of God, by becoming flesh, summoned us to the revolution of tenderness.»<sup>11</sup>

*Pope Francis and the Revolution of Tenderness –  
A New Chance for the Sacred Heart?*

More and more theologians start to analyze Pope Francis' magisterium. His way of doing theology and understanding God opens new doors for the idea of the «Sacred Heart» in postmodern times. Theology is relegated to its task by Francis to reflect about God's historical self-revelation. In this context, devotion to the Sacred Heart becomes the guardian of God's affectivity and corporeality that safeguards Jesus' humanity and the concretization of God's revelation. From there on, an understanding of God's excessive love develops; God who offers himself to human freedom and by whose acceptance he finally finds himself.

Pope Francis – Sacred-Heart-Devotion – Postmodernity – affectivity – human side of Jesu.

<sup>11</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Nr. 88

*Papst Franziskus und die Revolution der Zärtlichkeit –  
eine neue Chance für das Herz Jesu?*

Mehr und mehr Theologen machen sich daran, das Lehramt Papst Franziskus' zu analysieren. Seine Art Theologie zu treiben und Gott zu verstehen öffnen insbesondere der Rede vom «Herzen Jesu» neue Türen in der Postmoderne. Die Theologie wird von Franziskus auf ihre Aufgabe verwiesen, die historische Selbst-Offenbarung Gottes zu bedenken. In diesem Kontext wird die Herz-Jesu-Frömmigkeit zur Hüterin der Affektivität und Leibhaftigkeit Gottes, die die Menschlichkeit Jesu und die Konkretion der Offenbarung Gottes bewahrt. Von hier aus wird ein Verständnis von Gott als Exzess der Liebe entwickelt, der sich der Freiheit des Menschen anheimgibt und in dessen Annahme erst wirklich zu sich selbst kommt.

Papst Franziskus – Herz-Jesu-Verehrung – Postmoderne – Affektivität – Menschlichkeit Jesu.

*Le Pape François et la Révolution de la tendresse –  
Une nouvelle chance pour le Cœur de Jésus?*

De plus en plus de théologiens commencent à analyser le Magistère du Pape François. Sa manière de pratiquer la théologie et de comprendre Dieu ouvre en particulier de nouvelles portes dans le postmodernisme à la parole du «Cœur de Jésus». François renvoie la théologie à sa tâche de réflexion sur l'autorévélation historique de Dieu. Dans ce contexte, la dévotion au Sacré-Cœur de Jésus devient le gardien de l'affectivité et de la corporéité de Dieu, qui préserve l'humanité de Jésus et le caractère concret de la révélation de Dieu. D'ici se développe une compréhension de Dieu comme un excès d'amour, qui se confie à la liberté de l'homme et qui se réalise dans son acceptation.

Pape François – dévotion au Sacré-Cœur de Jésus – postmodernité – Affektivität – humanité de Jésus.

*Papa Francesco e la rivoluzione della tenerezza –  
una nuova possibilità per il Cuore di Gesù?*

Sempre più teologi analizzano gli insegnamenti di Papa Francesco. Il suo modo di fare teologia e capire Gesù aprono in particolare nuove porte alla parola del «Cuore di Gesù» nell'era postmoderna. Papa Francesco invita la teologia al compito di riconsiderare la rivelazione storica di Gesù. In questo contesto la credenza del «Cuore di Gesù» diventa la guardiana dell'affettività e della veridicità di Gesù, che preserva la sua umanità e la concretezza della sua rivelazione. Da qui si sviluppa la comprensione di Gesù quale eccesso di amore, a discrezione della libertà dell'essere umano il quale solo nella sua accoglienza diviene veramente a se stesso.

Papa Francesco – devozione alla sacro cuore di Gesù – postmodernità – affettività – umanità di Gesù.

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