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The Jesuits and the Devotion to the Heart of Jesus

Throughout their history, the Jesuits have deepened and disseminated the devotion to the Heart of Jesus. This will come as no surprise to those who are familiar with the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, which promote an interior knowledge of Christ culminating in the "Contemplation to Attain Love" and "loving and serving in all things". Few are aware that the Society of Jesus has selected the Apostleship of Prayer - now the Pope's Worldwide Prayer Network - as its instrument of choice to promote devotion to the Heart of Christ.

In 1883 the Fathers of the 23rd General Congregation approved Decree 46: *"We declare that the Society of Jesus accepts and receives with a spirit overflowing with joy and gratitude, the gentle burden (munus suavissimum) that our Lord Jesus Christ has entrusted to it, to practice, promote and propagate devotion to His most divine Heart".*

On July 2, 1688, on the Feast of the Visitation, the Lord manifested himself one last time to Margaret Mary: *"the Holy Virgin was on one side and Saint Francis de Sales and the saintly Father de la Colombière on the other. Then turning to the good Father de la Colombière, this Mother of goodness said: "As for you, faithful servant of My divine Son, you have a great share in this precious treasure. For if it is given to the Daughters of the Visitation to know and distribute to others, it is reserved to the Fathers of your Society to show and make known its use and value so that people may profit from it by receiving it with the respect and gratitude due to such a great a benefit".*

As for the Apostleship of Prayer, Fr. Henri Ramière, died in Toulouse on January 3rd, 1884. He could be considered the second founder, after Fr. François-Xavier Gautrelet SJ. At that point in time, the Apostleship of Prayer had released 15 editions of **the Messenger of the Sacred Heart**, and had more than 35,000 centres organized throughout the world. These would be decisive for the future, as according to Fr. Henri Ramière SJ: *"The Apostleship of Prayer is the fusion of our interests with those of the Heart of Jesus"*.

In December 1871 Fr. Beckx, then Superior General of the Jesuits, **consecrated the Society to the Sacred Heart of Jesus**. In 1896 Fr. Luis Martín SJ, Superior General of the Society of Jesus (1892-1906) accepted the position as **Director General of the Apostleship of Prayer**, as requested by the Sacred Congregation of Bishops and Regulars. The 1896 statutes were the first to specifically note this point. His successor, Fr. Franz Xavier Wernz SJ (1904-1914), was also very involved in this role entrusted to the General of the Society by the Holy See.

This might explain why, in 1915, the 26th General Congregation, in Decree 21, linked this specific mission - received by the Society of Jesus in 1883 - with the development of the Apostleship of Prayer:

*"The Fathers of the XXVI General Congregation, recalling the solemn declaration of the XXII Congregation, where it was professed devoutly that 'the Society of Jesus, with the greatest pleasure and the deepest gratitude, accepts and assumes this most pleasant task entrusted to it by our Lord Jesus Christ, to practice, develop and disseminate devotion to His divine Heart, and knowing from experience that **the Apostleship of Prayer is an excellent means to grow this devotion**, they have ratified once again, on the eve of the centenary of the*

restoration of the Society, the Society's great willingness in everything that concerns the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and they have expressed the fervent desire that all its members, in particular the Superiors, consider themselves personally and strongly recommended to develop and disseminate this pious Association of the Sacred Heart by all the means available to them"

On June 9th, 1972, **Fr. Pedro Arrupe SJ**, Superior General of the Society of Jesus (1907-1991), one hundred years after Fr. Beckx SJ, consecrated the Society to the Heart of Christ. In a letter sent to all Jesuits in April of the same year, he says:

"Overcoming the psychological obstacles which the external forms of this devotion may present, the Jesuit should revitalize it with the solid and virile Christocentric spirituality of the Exercises which, integrally Christocentric and culminating in total commitment, prepare us to "feel" the love of the Heart of Christ giving unity to the whole Gospel. The life of the Jesuit is perfectly integrated in his response to the call of the Eternal King and in the "Take, O Lord, and receive" of the Contemplation for obtaining love, which is the crown of the Exercises. To live that response and that offering will be for each one of us and for the whole Society the true realization of the spirit of Ignatian consecration to the Heart of Christ.

From this intense living of the Spirit of the Exercises issues, with a certain inescapable apostolic urgency, the pledge to live and offer one's own prayer and work in union with the Heart of Christ and so attain to a life profoundly centered in Christ and the Church. The Apostleship of Prayer has long animated, and still continues to animate, the priestly perspective of many Christian lives, drawing them onwards to the Eucharistic sacrifice of Christ and the consecration of the world to God (LG34). This instrument of the Apostleship of Prayer, which has so greatly helped the People of God in the past can, with appropriate renovation and adaptation, render new and greater service today, when the need is so keenly felt to establish apostolic groups of prayer and earnest spiritual commitment."

In 1986 Pope John Paul II confirmed the Society of Jesus in its mission received from Christ himself, of disseminating devotion to His divine Heart, **and also in the selection of the Apostleship of Prayer, as its instrument of choice to carry out this mission.**

"For these reasons, I sincerely desire that you pursue with persevering action, the dissemination of the true cult of the Heart of Christ, and that you be always ready to provide effective assistance to my brothers in the episcopacy so as to promote this cult everywhere, **by taking care to find the most adequate means to present it and to practice it**, so that the man of today, with his own mentality and sensibility, discovers there the true response to his questions and his expectations.

In the same way as last year, on the occasion of the Congress of the Apostleship of Prayer, when I particularly entrusted this work to you, strictly bound to the devotion of the Sacred Heart, today as well, during my pilgrimage to Paray-le-Monial **I ask you to make every possible effort to accomplish ever better the mission that Christ himself has entrusted to you**, the dissemination of the cult of His divine Heart. "

The Superior Generals of the Society of Jesus responded to this call. The first was Fr. Peter Hans Kolvenbach SJ (1983-2008), as is detailed in a book that collects some of his speeches and homilies

on the Heart of Christ: "*A Pleasant Mission*" (1988). He writes of the Society of Jesus' desire, since 1915, to solemnly bind promoting devotion to the Sacred Heart together with the Apostleship of Prayer (p.37).

Fr. Adolfo Nicolás SJ, Superior General from 2008 to 2016, gave impetus to the recreation of the Apostleship of Prayer and thus updated its spiritual foundations, the devotion to the Heart of Christ. He was the last Director General of the Apostleship of Prayer, the first being Fr. Luis Martín in 1896. Since 2016, in line with the process of recreating the Apostleship of Prayer as the Pope's Worldwide Prayer Network, constituted as a pontifical work, the Holy Father appoints a Jesuit as International Director, after prior consultation with the Superior General of the Society of Jesus.

In 2018 Francis instituted the Pope's Worldwide Prayer Network (Apostleship of Prayer) as a Pontifical Work to highlight the universal character of this mission. In 2020 it was established in canonical and Vatican juridical person. As a **Vatican Foundation**, it has its headquarters in the Vatican City, and is entrusted to the Society of Jesus. **Fr. Arturo Sosa SJ**, the current Superior General, contributed to the writing of the Statutes, and actively participated in the task of legal clarification. He also supports, like his predecessors, this **work which after ten years of recreation, proposes devotion to the Heart of Christ in a renewed way, in accordance with the wishes of Saint John Paul II.**

The Pope's Worldwide Prayer Network, the renewed version of the Apostleship of Prayer, today enters the dynamics of the Heart of Jesus through its spiritual journey called **The Way of the Heart. This itinerary is an updated version of the devotion to the Heart of Christ for today's times.** It is a coherent presentation of the spiritual wealth of the Apostleship of Prayer in the light of the Spiritual Exercises. It leads our hearts as close as possible to the Heart of Christ, making us available to his mission, **a mission of compassion for the world.**

This compassion, as Fr. Peter Hans Kolvenbach SJ says, "will be impossible without 'obtaining love' or 'without reaching love' through the Heart of the Savior" (July 2nd, 1988).

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