

Morality, Human Nature, and the Sacred Heart of Jesus

Joshua Evans

CHRISTIANS HAVE LONG BEEN putting the following pointed question to Jesus: “Why are we commanded to imitate you? Were we born of the Holy Spirit and of the Virgin Mary?” (*c. Iul. imp.* IV.87).¹ Jesus is the Son of God, fully human and fully divine. At our worst moments, we might act like we are gods, but, deep down, we know we are frail, finite, mortal beings. Forgiving our enemies is the closest we get to performing miracles. Jesus is like us, but he is better than us, and his being “better” seems to have a lot to do with his divine nature. How, then, can we be expected to imitate him? Furthermore, if Christ’s virtue is a function of his divine nature, then how is Jesus truly human? If he is human and divine and we are merely human, it seems that we cannot be like him and he cannot be like us.

This problem—we are expected to imitate a person who is at the same time human and divine—is not only one for spiritual groups and pastoral conversations. Theologian Gerald O’Collins helpfully sums up the problem classical Christology—two natures, one person—poses for moral theology: “How could we reconcile an absolute, intrinsic impeccability with Christ’s complete humanity—in particular, with his genuine human freedom? If Jesus could not have sinned under any circumstances whatsoever, was he truly free? Furthermore...[i]f, absolutely speaking, Jesus could not have disobeyed the divine will, how could he then have identified with the human condition?”² Jesus’s invitation to “come, follow me” seems to be a kind of cruel mockery of our impotent ability to imitate him fully, much like Superman challenging us to a race.

There are essentially two theological solutions to this problem entailed by classical Christology. One solution is to suggest that the moral life Jesus exemplifies and invites us into is not different in kind

¹ Unless otherwise stated, for any of Augustine’s works cited herein, I will use the following English translation: “Unfinished Work in Answer to Julian,” in *Answer to the Pelagians III: The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* 1/25, trans. by Roland J. Teske (New York: New City Press, 1999).

² Gerald O’Collins, *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus*, Second Edition (New York: Oxford, 2009), 269.

from what is possible for human nature as such. That is, both the moral teachings of Christianity and the person of Jesus are not so foreign to the human nature we inhabit. As a result, we are able to imitate Jesus because his being born of the Holy Spirit does not mean that his moral capabilities are different in kind from human nature as such. This solution is offered in both ancient and contemporary Christian thought, and it is widely respected. Within this solution there are two distinct but complementary kinds of approaches.

The first is a certain version of the natural law approach to morality. Fr. John Piderit, for instance, begins with what seems like an uncontroversial claim: “The pursuit of excellence is somewhere in our human genes.”³ This pursuit of excellence does not necessarily require any unique insight or ability possessed by Jesus: “Natural law does assume that a person believes in God, but it does not rely on belief in the divinity of Christ. God is the creator and God places us in the world in a framework by which we can know what God wants us to do. However, the natural law conviction is that by our human nature, we know what it is that we are supposed to strive for and what we are supposed to avoid.”⁴ Catholic virtue is something we are capable of achieving just by being human. Another example of this perspective comes from Lawler, Boyle and May’s popular book *Catholic Sexual Ethics: A Summary, Explanation, & Defense*. According to these authors, while desire can go awry, “[s]exual desire and emotional affectivity are part of the raw stuff out of which authentic human love can be shaped, but this material needs to be shaped intelligently if it is to become integrally and fully a component of love.” They apply this account of chastity to Christ:

Jesus, the complete human, provides a striking model of chastity. He is a sexual being, a virile yet affectionate male. His life was full of close and affectionate friendships with men and women alike. Yet Jesus was a celibate, a virgin because of the demands of his personal vocation as redeemer of the world. His example teaches us that the chaste person is the one who has his or her priorities right, who intelligently loves the goods of human nature and integrates his or her affective life into the vocation by which each one of us is called by God to pursue these goods.⁵

³ John Piderit, S.J., *Sexual Morality: A Natural Law Approach to Intimate Relationships* (New York: Oxford, 2011), 8.

⁴ Piderit, *Sexual Morality*, 45.

⁵ Ronald Lawler, Joseph Boyle Jr., and William E. May, *Catholic Sexual Ethics: A Summary, Explanation, & Defense*, Second Edition (Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor Press, 1998): 124-25.

While this kind of natural law approach might not make significant Christological claims, it does seem to answer the questions that opened this essay by saying that we are able to imitate Jesus because he too is human just like us. Implicitly, it seems that his divine nature does not impact his ability to live out the moral life. We might say that on this view Jesus is the Most Virtuous Man in the philosophical sense: the man who lives the virtues to their fullest human extent.

A complementary approach also suggests that Jesus is not so different from us, and to do so this approach “humanizes” Jesus in a way that seems to avoid the chasm between Jesus and us that is at the heart of classical Christology. This approach is not so much about the content of morality as it is about interpreting Jesus as a familiar exemplar. Fr. Thomas Weinandy has given a very fascinating account of this interpretation of Jesus.⁶ Weinandy’s core claim is “Only if Jesus assumed a humanity at one with the fallen race of Adam could his death and resurrection heal and save that humanity.”⁷ That is, Jesus must have adopted fallen human nature in all its senses (except for the propensity to sin) if he is to be the savior and moral exemplar of humanity: “To be *homoousious* [of the same substance] with us demands more than an ahistorical sameness of species, but a communion with us as we are in reality—brothers and sisters defiled by the sin of Adam.”⁸ This Christology becomes clearly relevant to moral theology in Weinandy’s account of the temptations of Jesus toward sin. Jesus, though he lacked concupiscence, must have had even worse temptations than the rest of us because he was never undivided in his desires: temptations “confronted him with a sharpness and force we do not experience.”⁹ It was Jesus’s very human experience of temptations that made him a true savior: “Only [because] the Son inherited an enfeebled humanity does his sinless life possess any soteriological value.”¹⁰ On Weinandy’s view, it was the deeply human life of Jesus that enabled him to become the savior and moral exemplar for the rest of us. As with the version of the natural law approach above, Weinandy also avoids the objection that Jesus is not our moral exemplar because of his human and divine natures. Rather, it is Jesus’s inhabiting of the fullness of fallen humanity that makes him our moral exemplar. He becomes just like us, and, because of that, we can be like him.

These two kinds of approaches are long-standing and widely respected, and I will show below that these approaches are anticipated

⁶ Thomas Weinandy, *In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh: An Essay on the Humanity of Christ* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993).

⁷ Weinandy, *In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh*, 28.

⁸ Weinandy, *In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh*, 35.

⁹ Weinandy, *In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh*, 99.

¹⁰ Weinandy, *In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh*, 38.

in the thought of an important ancient theologian. This essay argues, however, that there is a better approach to understanding the relationship between Christ's human and divine natures and the moral life to which we are called. The outlines of this alternative approach are rooted in the patristic tradition, and the details of this approach are given expression in a unique way in recent papal writings on the Sacred Heart of Jesus. If the essential question is how we mere humans can imitate someone who is both human and divine, the approach defended in this essay suggests that the question is based on false premises. I argue that Augustine of Hippo shows us why it is good news for us that the human nature of Jesus is impacted by its confluence with his divine nature, and then I argue that recent popes—I focus primarily on Pius XI and Pius XII—apply this assumption to their interpretations of Jesus as moral exemplar in their writings on the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Perhaps the turn to the Sacred Heart is unexpected; it is not, however, unfitting. The Sacred Heart of Jesus is not merely a devotional image but also a symbol expressing the deepest core of the person of Jesus.¹¹ The popes give us good reason to think that the confluence of divinity and humanity in the one person of Jesus is crucial for our understanding of a moral life in imitation of Jesus.

AUGUSTINE AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF HUMAN NATURE

Augustine is relevant to this essay for two reasons, both related. First, he very clearly connects his Christology to his claims about both moral theology and soteriology, and, in that way, he gives us an example of what might be called “Christological morality.” His Christology shapes and is shaped by his other commitments regarding the nature of creation, the effects of grace, and the purpose of redemption. Second, much of what he has to say comes within his engagement with a long-time theological opponent, Julian of Eclanum, and Julian's ideas in many ways anticipate the same solutions offered by the approaches that we saw at the beginning of this essay. What Augustine has to say in response to Julian can also be extended as a response to those more recent approaches. Augustine clears away the objections, and then the popes help to fill in the details regarding why classical Christology is good news for moral theology.

Writing in the Mediterranean world in the early fifth century, Julian was the most consequential theologian of what has been called Pelagianism. As a good Pelagian, Julian believed in the integrity of creation and rejected any concept of the fall: “All elements in

¹¹ Karl Rahner, S.J., “Devotion to the Sacred Heart,” *Theological Investigations*, Volume 3, trans. Karl Kruger and Boniface Kruger (New York: Crossroads, 1982), 321-52.

absolutely all creatures which are found to be natural were made in the very best way so that any supposed improvement in them is found to be stupid and sacrilegious” (*c. Iul. imp.* V.15). Julian explains the seemingly problematic elements of creation by saying, essentially, that they are not actually problematic: “From God’s wisdom [human beings] received in their bodies beautiful parts and shameful parts so that they might learn in themselves both modesty and confidence” (*c. Iul. imp.* V.15). If nature as it currently exists is in the pristine condition God intends for it, then it would be logically impossible for Jesus to have a human nature that was both different and better than ours. For Julian, our human nature sets the standard for what it means to be human. As a result, Christ’s relation to moral theology is exclusively as moral exemplar and teacher, much like the philosopher’s virtuous man. We are able to imitate Jesus because, like us, he is human, and there could be no way to possess a human nature better than what we possess because all of creation is integrally perfect in the way God intends it.

Because of the Pelagian commitment to the integrity of creation, Pelagians necessarily reject the claim that God must enable human beings to achieve their full flourishing through the infusion of grace. No extra help is needed. Indeed, extra help would be a detriment to human freedom and human flourishing. The same must be true of Jesus. He cannot both be truly human and have had extra help in living a virtuous life. To say as much would be to “separate the nature of Christ from the community of human beings” (*c. Iul. imp.* IV.50 [429]). Rather, according to Julian, “We are emphatically taught by clear testimony that the righteousness of the man he assumed came, not from the difference of his nature, but from his voluntary action” (*c. Iul. imp.* IV.84 [449]).

If it were otherwise—if Jesus was uniquely enabled to live out virtue because of the confluence of human and divine in his one person—then he would not be a fitting example for us: “Whom would he have presented to human beings for their imitation, if the nature of a strange flesh set him apart and if the difference of his substance undermined the severity of his teaching” (*c. Iul. imp.* IV.86 [451]). From Julian’s perspective, Augustine’s Christology is loathsome: “As someone more fortunate by birth, not by virtue, [Jesus] would have lost not only trophies won by his actions, but would have also been pressed with charges of fraud if he said to mortals: Strive for the patience of him who feels nothing, and come through true crosses to the virtues of a false body that suffers nothing.... Certainly nothing more irreligious, nothing more wicked can be thought up than these lies” (*c. Iul. imp.* IV.49-50). Not only would Jesus be an impossible exemplar to imitate, but he would not even be worthy of imitation. On the other hand, if Jesus is just like us in that his connection to the divine did not affect his humanity in a unique way then we are able to

imitate him and he is worthy of our respect and admiration. He lives human nature better than us, but we are able to live it as he lives it.

Augustine has a few pointed questions that seem to undermine Julian's tidy connections between Christology and moral theology. The essential question for Augustine is this: "Did...that assumption of a human nature which made God and man one person contribute nothing to that man toward the excellence of the righteousness you say he had from voluntary action?" (*c. Iul. imp.* IV.84 [450]) Augustine's answer is, of course, that Christ's "excellence of righteousness" did come somehow from the confluence of divine and human in his one person. Augustine offers three penetrating criticisms of Julian's Christology that suggest Augustine is right to defend this claim.

First, in response to Julian's claim that Christ's virtue is exclusively a matter of human willpower, Augustine wonders whether Julian gains Christ's moral exemplarity at the extreme cost of implicitly advocating an Adoptionist Christology:

Does the defense of free choice so drive you headlong against the grace of God that you say that even the mediator himself merited by his will to be the only Son of God?...For, according to you, the man was not assumed by the Word of God so that he was born of the Virgin, but having been born of the Virgin, he afterward made progress by the power of his own will and brought it about that he was assumed by the Word of God. That is, he did not have a will of such goodness and greatness because of that union, but arrived at that union by a will of such goodness and greatness. And the Word was not made flesh in the womb of the Virgin, but afterward by the merit of the man and his human and voluntary virtue. (*c. Iul. imp.* IV.84 [450])

In other words, Julian's assumption that Christ's virtue cannot be a consequence of being the Son of God seems to suggest that being supremely virtuous caused him to become the Son of God. A corresponding problem for Julian is that Christ loses his distinctiveness as Son and Savior: "It also follows for you [Julian] that, as you believe that he was assumed by the Word of God because he willed to be, so you believe that many could have been assumed in that way, if they too had likewise willed it, or could be assumed if they would will it." Christ's distinctiveness is only one of degree, not of kind, and the moral exemplarity of Christ is an implicit judgment on the rest of us: Jesus "turns out to be the only [Christ] because of the laziness of the human will, though there could have been more, if human beings had willed it" (*c. Iul. imp.* IV.84).

In a second kind of response, Augustine also pushes back against Julian's account of virtue and its relation to sin and temptation. On Julian's terms, if virtue is found in conquering desires, then Julian

seems to hold that people are “more praiseworthy in their virtue to the extent that they resist more strongly a greater good than if they fought against a lesser one” (*c. Iul. imp.* IV.53 [431]). Thus it would make sense, on Julian’s terms, that “Christ ought to have been most filled with desires in his flesh, just as he was the greatest of all human beings in his virtue” (*c. Iul. imp.* IV.49). To be the most virtuous man, he must have undergone the most extreme temptations. This is perfectly logical if one assumes that virtue is premised on the possibility of vice. Augustine completely rejects that premise in his third criticism of Julian’s views.

Augustine’s third criticism is at the intersection of soteriology and eschatology. If human nature as it exists now is in the pristine condition God intended for it then what was the point of Christ’s death and resurrection? The point would not seem to be a transformation of human nature from fallen to eventually perfected in heaven. In fact, Julian’s claims about the pristine state of human nature now and the necessity of the possibility of sin for human virtue seem to entail that there can be no transformation into something better in heaven. Augustine draws out the logical conclusion of Julian’s premises: “You say that human nature ‘could not have been capable of its own good, unless it were also capable of evil.’ Why, then, after piously living this life will it be capable of good alone and not of evil, removed, that is, not only from all will or necessity, but even from the possibility of sinning? Or will we perhaps have to fear that we might sin even when we will be equal to the holy angels?” (*c. Iul. imp.* V.58 [582]) Julian’s claim that the possibility of sin is essential to human nature seems to mean that Christ does not overcome sin once for all, but instead the fight against sin is projected even into heaven. Or, if Julian wants to say that there is no possibility of sin in heaven, he must say that human nature does not exist in heaven, because human nature cannot exist without the possibility of sin. Human beings who cannot sin—such as the saints in heaven—are not really human beings on Julian’s account. On Julian’s terms, heaven entails the annihilation of human nature.

From Augustine’s perspective, the entire point of calling Christ our moral exemplar is that Christ reveals to us a better way to be human. He overcomes the limitations inherent to “fallen” human nature and elevates us through grace to become like him. Augustine writes, “It has, rather, become clear that the nature of human beings, in comparison to that integrity, rectitude, and good health in which it was originally created, now has all these things to a lesser degree. Christ came to restore this nature to integrity, to correct it, and to heal it, for he had integrity without any corruption, rectitude without any depravity, good health without any desire for sin” (*c. Iul. imp.* IV.59 [437]). One of the fundamental differences between Jesus and us is that Jesus did not suffer from the effects of original sin: “Christ, then, who most perfectly fulfilled the law, desired nothing that was

forbidden, because he certainly did not have the discord between the flesh and the spirit which was turned into the nature of human beings by the transgression of the first human being, for he was born of the Spirit and the Virgin, not through the concupiscence of the flesh.” Augustine immediately applies this Christological claim to moral theology: “With this example of perfection set before us, each imitator ought to aim at this: to strive and to long not to have at all the desires of the flesh which the apostle [Paul] forbids us to carry out. For in that way we can by daily progress lessen those desires which we will not have at all when salvation is complete” (*c. Iul. imp.* IV.57 [435]). Christ’s perfection is not a cause of our despair. His perfection is the reason to have hope for ourselves, because he anticipates what we hope to become.

What Augustine means by “when salvation is complete” is quite straightforward: we are not fully saved until we rise from the dead and enter fully into God’s glory. Augustine fills this claim out by reflecting on a passage from 1 Corinthians:

And so, just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so let us bear the image of the heavenly man. The former is repeated as a fact; the latter is given as a command. The former is, of course, already present; the latter is in the future. And so, we have borne the former image because of the condition of being born and because of the contagion of sin, but we bear this latter image because of the grace of being reborn. But we meanwhile bear it in hope; we shall bear it in reality as a reward when we shall rise and reign in blessedness and righteousness (*c. Iul. imp.* VI.31 [696]).

The salvation that Christ brings is lived out now through our imitation of him but is only fully realized when the last evil has been overcome.

What the contrast between Augustine and Julian shows us is that Christ’s distinctive virtue is good news for us because it anticipates the life to which Christ calls us. Julian’s account of Christ’s merely human virtue is compelling only if we think that the best we can hope for is to capitalize on the intrinsic capacities of human nature as we experience it now. For Augustine, on the other hand, the divinely human virtue of Jesus highlights the way in which grace perfects nature and takes nature where it cannot go on its own. The *telos* of Augustine’s account of morality is not merely the virtue of the philosophers but a sharing in the perfection of human nature lived out by Jesus: “Christ was said to be the heavenly man even according to the flesh, not because he took his flesh from heaven, but because he raised it too up into heaven” (*c. Iul. imp.* VI.40 [714]). Christ’s experience of a humanity that completely lacks sin and struggle and, after the resurrection, even the possibility of death, is what we hope

for: “By forgiving our debts and by not bringing us into temptation, he brings us to the final victory by which the death even of the body will be swallowed up so that those who boast do not trust in their own virtue, but boast in the Lord” (c. *Iul. imp.* VI.41 [720]). Christ’s divinely human virtue is bad news only if we are attached to the limited, fallen human nature we now inhabit.

CHRISTOLOGY OF THE SACRED HEART

If we turn to recent papal encyclicals on the Sacred Heart of Jesus, we can see a robust application of the kind of transformative Christological moral theology advocated by Augustine. For Augustine and the popes, true salvation is the integration of our own lives according to the life of God, the bringing of all aspects of our identity into harmony so that by our very lives we honor and worship God. What we see in Christ’s Sacred Heart is the model for integration. Christ’s heart is infused with divine love, so that Christ sees all things and loves all things in a way consonant with a human life fully permeated by God’s life.

As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says in its section on the Incarnation, quoting Pius XII, the Sacred Heart of Jesus “‘is quite rightly considered the chief sign and symbol of that ... love with which the divine Redeemer continually loves the eternal Father and all human beings without exception” (no. 478). The *Catechism* could have also referred to Pius XI, who suggests that the Sacred Heart contains “the sum of all religion and therefore the pattern of more perfect life” (*Miserentissimus Redemptor*, no. 3). It could also have gone a bit further back, to Leo XIII, who consecrated the entire world to the Sacred Heart, proclaiming, “In that Sacred Heart all our hopes should be placed, and from it the salvation of men is to be confidently sought” (*Annum Sacrum*, no. 12). Of course, we also have the writings and homilies of John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis to mine for insights.¹² The rich history of papal reflection on

¹² For instance, see Pope Benedict XVI, “Letter of His Holiness Benedict XVI on Occasion of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Encyclical ‘*Haurietis Aquas*,’” May 15, 2006, w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/letters/2006/documents/hf_ben-xvi_let_20060515_50-haurietis-aquas.html: “When we practice this devotion, not only do we recognize God’s love with gratitude but we continue to open ourselves to this love so that our lives are ever more closely patterned upon it.” Other representative papal writings on the Sacred Heart include Paul VI’s apostolic letter *Investigabiles Divitias Christi*, February 6, 1965, w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/la/apost_letters/documents/hf_p-vi_apl_19650206_investigabiles-divitias.html; John Paul II, “Letter of John Paul II on the 100th Anniversary of the Consecration of the Human Race to the Divine Heart of Jesus,” June 11, 1999, w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_19990611_consagrazione-sacro-cuore.html; John Paul II’s encyclical *Dives in Misericordia*, November 30, 1980, w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30111980_dives-in-misericordia.html. For two useful secondary texts, see Timothy O’Donnell, *The Heart*

the Sacred Heart unfailingly suggests that the Sacred Heart is a privileged and distinctively important Christian reality to which theology should turn.

For the Popes, reflection on the Sacred Heart does not remain merely at the level of recognition that in the heart of Jesus God shows his love for us. Rather, reflection on the Sacred Heart also teaches us how to properly respond to the love God has for us. In other words, the Sacred Heart is immediately relevant for moral theology. For example, for a period in the mid-twentieth century, the Sacred Heart of Jesus was an important point of reference for Catholic Social Teaching, a connection modeled on Pius XI's social encyclical of the Sacred Heart, *Caritate Christi Compulsi*.¹³ More importantly for our purposes here, the popes draw out fundamental principles regarding what the Sacred Heart has to teach us about being truly human in the way that the Son of God is truly human.

Below I draw from the papal encyclicals two essential points for moral theology inspired by the Sacred Heart. The first is that theological reflection on the Sacred Heart highlights in a unique way that human nature is in need of healing. In contrast to those theologies that attempt to humanize Jesus to be more like us, a moral theology informed by reflection on the Sacred Heart emphasizes that it is precisely in gazing on the pure, Sacred Heart of Jesus that we see how desperately we need a savior. By looking at Christ, we recognize that we are ill and we realize with more certainty why the Church must be, in the words of Pope Francis, a "field hospital."¹⁴ Second and relatedly, the popes point out that the healing process for our wounded nature can only be understood by looking at a fully healthy human nature: as Pius XI puts it, Christ's heart contains "the pattern of more perfect life" (*Miserentissimus Redemptor*, no. 3). Christ shares in our nature precisely in order to heal and save it, and that healing and saving is already on display in the way Christ lives a distinctive life of virtue.

Pope Pius XI, who was pope between the two great wars (1922-1939), emphasizes more than any recent pope that the Christian call to perfection corresponds fundamentally to the Christian claim that

of the Redeemer (California: Ignatius Press, 1994) and Prosper Gueranger, "Feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus," in *The Liturgical Year: Time After Pentecost* (London: Burns & Oates, 1901).

¹³ See Carl Moell, "America and the Sacred Heart," *America: The Jesuit Review*, May 26, 1956, americamagazine.org/issue/100/america-and-sacred-heart, which summarizes *America* magazine's period of important articles on the Sacred Heart and social ethics.

¹⁴ Antonio Spadaro, "A Big Heart Open to God: An Interview with Pope Francis," *America: The Jesuit Review*, September 30, 2013, americamagazine.org/pope-interview.

human beings are fallen. According to Pius XI, both the recognition of our fallen nature and the call to perfection have been drowned out in recent times by the noise of a kind of neo-Pelagian naturalism very reminiscent of the thought of Julian of Eclanum. This new naturalism has infiltrated modern society and ethics: “The wise men of this age of ours ... following the ancient error of Pelagius, ascribe to human nature a certain native virtue by which of its own force it can go onward to higher things” (*Miserentissimus Redemptor*, no. 8). The “pernicious error” of neo-Pelagianism is the presumption that “the instinctive tendencies of the will are, all of them, good, and hence are neither to be feared or checked” (*Ad Salutem Humani*, no. 36).¹⁵ For the neo-Pelagians, there would not seem to be a need for a new model of perfection since that need would be based on the false assumption that something is wrong with humanity. Neo-Pelagians suggest both that we are not wounded and that we do not need healing. Or, one might say, healing for neo-Pelagians is found precisely in embracing “the instinctive tendencies of the will.”

For Pius XI, reflection on the Sacred Heart necessarily requires the admission of our own imperfection, rooted in our complicity in Adam’s sin.¹⁶ Through seeing the Sacred Heart we are reminded that we are sinners redeemed. Returning love to God is of course the “first and foremost thing in” devotion to the Sacred Heart, but our return of love is intimately connected to what Pius calls reparation or expiation: a love flowing from the admission of our sinfulness.¹⁷ In other words, the point of devotion to the Sacred Heart is that we “might have a more vehement hatred of sin, and make a more ardent return of love for His love” (*Miserentissimus Redemptor*, no. 11).¹⁸ As an alternative to the emergent neo-Pelagianism, Pius advises us to “crucify our flesh with its vices and concupiscences,” in order that “the life of Jesus may be

¹⁵ This encyclical is published as *Encyclical Letter of Pope Pius XI on “Saint Augustine,”* trans. Vatican Press (Washington, DC: National Catholic Welfare Conference, 1930).

¹⁶ See *Miserentissimus Redemptor*, no. 8: “Moreover, this duty of expiation is laid upon the whole race of men since, as we are taught by the Christian faith, after Adam’s miserable fall, infected by hereditary stain, subject to concupiscences and most wretchedly depraved, it would have been thrust down into eternal destruction.”

¹⁷ See *Miserentissimus Redemptor*, nos. 6–7: “For since we are all sinners and laden with many faults, our God must be honored by us not only by that worship wherewith we adore His infinite Majesty with due homage, or acknowledge His supreme dominion by praying, or praise His boundless bounty by thanksgiving; but besides this we must need make satisfaction to God the just avenger, ‘for our numberless sins and offenses and negligences.’”

¹⁸ For Pius, this hatred of sin is emphasized above through a kind of fire-and-brimstone exhortation that closes out the document. Pius reminds us sinners to fear that we “shall bewail” ourselves when we “see Him whom they pierced ‘coming in the clouds of heaven’” (no. 21).

manifested in our mortal flesh” (*Miserentissimus Redemptor*, no. 9).¹⁹ The contrast between the Sacred Heart and our hearts unfailingly shows us that our human nature is in need of healing.

It is tempting to see a kind of fear-mongering in Pius XI’s warnings about neo-Pelagianism. Is it really so bad to think that our “instinctive tendencies” are good? Might one not say that seeing in human nature “a certain native virtue by which of its own force it can go onward to higher things” is a great compliment to God’s creation (*Miserentissimus Redemptor*, no. 8)? Pius shows in a second encyclical on the Sacred Heart why an overly-trusting attitude toward human nature *is* so bad for human life. In *Caritate Christi Compulsi* (1932), Pius XI suggests that the consequences of neo-Pelagian attitudes to human nature can clearly be seen in the wreckage left in the wake of the great financial crisis of the time. Trusting in the natural virtue of human desires leads to substantial problems. In 1932, it was not an overstatement for Pius to point out that “the desire of money is the root of all evils” (no. 3). According to Pius it is a short distance from neo-Pelagian ethics to the world’s financial destitution: avaricious desire, in its early stages, breeds “mutual suspicion” and fosters a “self-love which orders and subordinates all things to its own advantage,” the consequence of which is an “unequal division of ‘possessions’” (no. 3). By forgetting God and focusing only on human nature, we fail to distinguish between the “legitimate appetites of nature” and our “unbridled lusts” (no. 6). This forgetting of God “removes all checks from the most powerful lusts of man,” causing us to omit “the idea of an original sin and of a first rebellion of man against God” (no. 23). The result of this neo-Pelagianism is a widespread “cupidity,” a “sordid seeking for each one’s own benefit,” and the “insatiable greed for earthly goods” (nos. 3, 18). This unholy greed is “the chief reason why we see now, to our great sorrow, that mankind is brought to its present critical condition” (no. 3). Disordered desires and the pernicious errors of neo-Pelagianism are relevant to more than just the topics dealt with in *Casti Connubii*, the famous encyclical on marriage released under Pius XI. Lust is not confined to the bedroom, and fallen human nature is always with us.

For Pius, there is no question that humanity needs a savior who can break us out of the bonds of our “natural” desires and tendency toward sin. The “spirit of loving reparation” to the Sacred Heart, then, remains essential to human life, since it helps “the noble-hearted Christian subdue the base passions that tend to make him violate the moral order” (*Caritate Christi Compulsi*, nos. 25, 30). Reparation expressed through penance “is a weapon that strikes right at the root of all evil,

¹⁹ I have substituted the RSV translation for the quotation from 2 Cor.

that is, at the lust of material wealth and the wanton pleasures of life” (no. 25). Reflection on the Sacred Heart of Jesus cannot fail to call us to this reparation, because the contrast between Christ’s true humanity and our own limited human nature is so stark and our need for transformation so apparent.

If Pius XI places special emphasis on the ways the Sacred Heart turns us to see our own sinfulness, Pius XII builds upon Pius XI by showing how the human nature of Christ distilled in the concept of the Sacred Heart illuminates our sinfulness and points toward true virtue. Pius XII quotes Pius XI to establish that the Sacred Heart “more easily leads our minds to know Christ the Lord intimately and more effectively turns our hearts to love Him more ardently and to imitate him more perfectly” (*Haurietis Aquas*, no. 15). This love of Christ for us, according to Pius XII, is intimately connected to our own sinfulness. Quoting Hosea, Pius XII reminds us that God says to us, “I will draw them with the cords of Adam, with the bonds of love ... I will heal their wounds, I will love them” (*Haurietis Aquas*, no. 26).²⁰ Pius reminds us that the love of God is a healing love that seeks to overcome our brokenness and call us to a higher life than we can live on our own.

While approaches like Julian of Eclanum’s claim to take the “true humanity” of Jesus seriously, the popes see their own Sacred Heart Christology as equally serious about Christ’s human nature. Christians, says Pius, “must clearly understand the reasons why the Church gives the highest form of worship to the Heart of the divine Redeemer.” First, “we recognize that His Heart, the noblest part of human nature, is hypostatically united to the Person of the divine Word.” Secondly, “His Heart, more than all the other members of His body, is the natural sign and symbol of His boundless love for the human race” (*Haurietis Aquas*, nos. 21–22). In other words, the Sacred Heart is distinctively an image of the Incarnation because it is both human and sacred.

The love symbolized in the image of the Sacred Heart has three essential aspects, according to Pius XII. The first two are obvious: the love between the Father and Son, and the love of God for humanity (*Haurietis Aquas*, nos. 36–37). For our interests here, however, it is the third aspect of that love that matters most: the human love of Christ. As Pius says, “We must note well that His love was not entirely the spiritual love proper to God inasmuch as ‘God is a spirit’” (no. 38).

²⁰ Here Pius is quoting Hosea 11:4–14:5. The text of Hosea used by him is of course from the Vulgate and so differs from modern translations. One is reminded here of Francis’ exhortation to “heal the wounds,” in Spadaro, “A Big Heart Open to God,” www.americamagazine.org/pope-interview. See also Pope Francis, “Morning Meditation in the Chapel of the *Domus Sanctae Marthae*,” February 5, 2015, m.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/cotidie/2015/documents/papa-francesco-cotidie_20150205_i-will-cure-you.html.

Rather, “The love which breathes from the Gospel, from the letters of the Apostles and the pages of the Apocalypse, all of which portray the love of the Heart of Jesus Christ, expresses not only divine love but also human sentiments of love. All who profess themselves Catholics accept this without question” (no. 38). The love symbolized by the Sacred Heart includes, in a special way, the human love of Jesus.

Pius has no doubt that the human love of the Sacred Heart is premised on Christ’s true humanity.²¹ Only someone truly human can love in a truly human way, and to deny Christ’s true humanity is to be, in the words of John (quoted by Pius), “a seducer and the antichrist” (*Haurietis Aquas*, no. 39). Furthermore, according to Pius, if Christ’s human nature is to be truly human, it must be truly embodied and emotional: “[S]ince there can be no doubt that Jesus Christ received a true body and had all the affections proper to the same, among which love surpassed all the rest, it is likewise beyond doubt that He was endowed with a physical heart like ours; for without this noblest part of the body the ordinary emotions of human life are impossible” (no. 41).

In turning to the emotions, Pius highlights a distinctive contribution of theological reflection on the Sacred Heart. As we have seen, for some accounts of Christian morality, it is Christ’s emotions and temptations that show us in a unique way that Christ truly adopted our humanity. For Pius however, what is most relevant about Christ’s emotions is their perfection, not merely their presence. It is precisely the interplay between Christ’s divine and human natures that allows Christ to live a perfect emotional life free from internal temptation and sin.

the Heart of Jesus Christ, hypostatically united to the divine Person of the Word, certainly beat with love and with the other emotions but these, joined to a human will full of divine charity and to the infinite love itself which the Son shares with the Father and the Holy Spirit, were in such complete unity and agreement that never among these three loves was there any contradiction or disharmony (*Haurietis Aquas*, no. 41).

Pius quotes Augustine to establish the crucial theological principle for a Christological moral theology: “Like a choir singing in harmony with the note that has been sounded, so should His Body learn from

²¹ “Nothing, then, was wanting to the human nature which the Word of God united to Himself. Consequently, He assumed it in no diminished way, in no different sense in what concerns the spiritual and the corporeal: that is, it was endowed with intellect and will and the other internal and external faculties of perception, and likewise with the desires and all the natural impulses of the senses” (*Haurietis Aquas*, no. 40).

its Head” (no. 50).²² To suggest that Christ cannot be the choir director unless he too sings a bit off key is to miss the point of having a choir director. His role as model and savior is rooted not in his struggle but in his exemplarity.

For both Augustine and the popes, Christian salvation is not merely a forensic claim about the significance of Christ’s death on the cross and its mitigation of our guilt before God. Christian salvation is about the integration of our nature according to the love of God, and the model for that integration is Christ as both human and divine. The Sacred Heart, the encapsulation of a human nature infused by divine love, shows us that we are saved only through a transformation of our fallen nature into the very nature Christ reveals to us by being Emmanuel, “God with us.” The Sacred Heart of Jesus shows that the human nature assumed by the Word is an earthly anticipation of the same human nature we will all possess when the Spirit that raised Christ from the dead fully infuses our human nature too (Rom. 8:11).

CONCLUSION

Pope Francis stands in the same long line of emphasizing the transformation of our human nature through theological reflection on the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Francis has a unique capacity for helping us see what is lost when we overlook or downplay the distinctiveness of the Christian call to perfection. He writes in his Lenten message for 2015: “In the Incarnation, in the earthly life, death, and resurrection of the Son of God, the gate between God and man, between heaven and earth, opens once for all.” The encounter with Jesus is not a challenge to our humanity, as the questions that opened this essay seemed to assume, but is instead based on a need for a change in our humanity. For Francis, the encounter with Jesus points the way toward our need for a “formation of the heart.” Francis invites us to pray to Jesus, in the words of the Litany of the Sacred Heart, “*Fac cor nostrum secundum cor tuum.*”²³ That is, “make our hearts according to your heart.” The need to have our hearts formed into the heart of Jesus is built into the logic of the Gospel. To think otherwise, to see Jesus merely as the best of what we are already capable of, is to settle for an ersatz version of salvation.

In a later homily, Francis highlights what happens when we prefer old wine to new: “if your heart is closed to the newness of the Holy Spirit, you will never reach the full truth.... your Christian life will be a half-and-half life, a patched up life, mended with new things but on a structure that is not open to the Lord’s voice: a closed heart, because

²² Here Pius is quoting Augustine, *Enarr. in Ps. LXXXVII*, 3.

²³ Francis, “Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for Lent 2015,” October 4, 2014, w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/lent/documents/papa-francesco_20141004_messaggio-quaresima2015.html.

you are not capable of changing the wineskins.” The Pope exhorts us to pray that “the Lord give us the grace of an open heart, of a heart open to the voice of the Holy Spirit, which can discern what must not change because it is fundamental from what has to change in order to be able to receive the newness of the Holy Spirit.”²⁴ While some would see in Francis’s words merely an ecclesio-political shot across the bow of those of a certain rightward theological disposition and stale pastoral habits, what Francis is getting at is something much more fundamental. His emphasis on the newness of the Gospel is fundamentally an anthropological commitment about the need for a fundamental transformation of human life through God’s help.

Francis emphasizes the “revolutionary” character of Christian morality, a revolution that is so new and surprising because in Jesus we encounter and respond to a kind of “unjust” mercy.²⁵ This mercy seems unjust to us precisely because it is so undeserved, since, in encountering Jesus, we see just how broken we are. Or, as the Pope puts it, “The privileged place of the encounter with Jesus Christ is my sin.”²⁶ In suggesting that Jesus brings about a “revolution” in morality, Francis is expanding on a principle articulated in the Second Vatican Council’s document *Gaudium et Spes*. According to the Council Fathers, “Christ, the new [*novissimus*; ever-new] Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear” (no. 22). It is Christ’s true humanity that reveals us to ourselves and makes our supreme calling clear. The Word has assumed human flesh and “worked with human hands...thought with a human mind, acted by human choice, and loved with a human heart.” Because of this true humanity, “He blazed a trail, and if we follow it, life and death are made holy and take on new meaning” (no. 22). Christ “is Himself the perfect man” who “restores [to us] the divine likeness which had been disfigured from the first sin onward” (no. 22). In gazing at Christ’s human nature, we confirm our suspicions that we are not flourishing, and we thereby begin to catch a glimpse of the full flourishing of human nature found in ““the redemption of the body,”” a redemption in which our entire nature is enlivened by the Spirit and “the whole person is renewed from within” (no. 22). Christian morality is premised on a merciful healing of our sinfulness, and this healing is what

²⁴ Pope Francis, “Morning Meditation in the Chapel of the Domus Sanctae Marthae: New Wineskins,” January 18, 2016, w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/cotidie/2016/documents/papa-francesco-cotidie_20160118_new-wineskins.html

²⁵ Silvina Premat, “The Attraction of the Cardinal,” *Traces: Litterae Communionis*, July 2001, archivio.traces-cl.com/Giu2001/argent.htm.

²⁶ Pope Francis, “Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Communion and Liberation Movement,” March 7, 2015, w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/march/documents/papa-francesco_20150307_comunione-liberazione.html.

makes it necessary that Jesus “*primereas* us.” That is, Jesus goes ahead of us and calls us forward.²⁷ Jesus “is like the almond blossom: the one that blooms first, and announces the arrival of spring.”²⁸ What is new and revolutionary about this morality is that Jesus both models it for us and makes it possible for our hearts to be made into his heart.

M

²⁷ Francis, “Address.”

²⁸ Francis, “Address.”