



## **An Advent Pastoral Letter**

On Returning to the Heart of Jesus

**To be read at all Masses on Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> December 2024**

My dear brothers and sisters,

On Christmas Eve, Pope Francis will open the Holy Year Door of Saint Peter's in Rome to mark the beginning of the Jubilee Year 2025. This gesture leads me to picture the open doors of all our churches this Sunday and to picture you crossing their threshold. I think especially of our Cathedral in Shrewsbury and Saint Joseph's Eucharistic Shrine in Stockport, which will serve as pilgrim churches in this Holy Year. I want us to reflect on how passing through the doors of every Catholic church must lead us to the Heart of Jesus opened to us in His Eucharist and in all the Sacraments of His grace and mercy.

Today as the Advent Scriptures invite us to turn our eyes to the Redeemer<sup>i</sup> amid the crises of time, we are conscious of the shadows of war and conflict across the world; and the threat of euthanasia to the sick and the aged in our own society that has led you to give such impressive witness to the value of human life. Pope Francis has set a clear priority for us in his recent letter to the Church, writing: "I turn my gaze to the heart of Christ ... this leads me to propose to the whole Church renewed reflection on the love of Christ represented in his Sacred Heart. For there we find the whole Gospel, a synthesis of the truths of our faith, all that we adore and seek in faith, all that responds to our deepest needs"<sup>ii</sup>. The Holy Father speaks of a personal discovery that awaits us, echoing the words of Saint Francis de Sales, "Each of us can look therein and see our name carved in letters of love ..."<sup>iii</sup>.

Pope Francis reminds us, this encounter with the divine and human love of Jesus Christ must be the source of our mission for "As we contemplate the Sacred Heart, mission becomes a matter of love. For the greatest danger in mission is that, amid all the things we say and do, we fail to bring a joyful encounter with the love of Christ who embraces and saves us"<sup>iv</sup>. This same encounter has a far-reaching social dimension which leads Pope Francis to quote his predecessor, Saint John Paul II, who insisted it is only by entrusting ourselves to the Heart of Jesus that "over the ruins accumulated by hatred and violence, the greatly desired civilization of love, the Kingdom of the Heart of Christ, can be built"<sup>v</sup>.

The Sacred Heart is a familiar image in our homes and churches, forming a visual summary of the whole experience of Christian faith<sup>vi</sup>. Pope Francis observes that certain artistic representations of Christ's Heart might strike us "as tasteless and not particularly conducive to affection or prayer ..." Yet, he writes "this is of little importance since they are only invitations to prayer"<sup>vii</sup>. For the living Heart of Jesus is found in the Mystery of the Eucharist.

This Sunday as we receive a new Lectionary with all the Scriptures to be read at Mass, Pope Francis invites us to recognise "The Christ we see depicted with a pierced and burning heart" is always "the same Christ who, for love of us, was born in Bethlehem, passed through Galilee healing the sick, embracing sinners and showing mercy. The same Christ who loved us to the very end..."<sup>viii</sup>. This 'Love that goes to the end' is the miracle of love that is the Eucharist. Pope Francis reminds us how England's newest Saint, John Henry Newman "Encountered the living Heart of Jesus" in this Blessed Sacrament and prayed: "O ... loving Heart of Jesus, you are concealed in the Holy Eucharist and beat for us still ..." <sup>ix</sup>. Every time we cross the threshold of our churches, the same discovery awaits us at the Altar and before the Tabernacle where we "discover in the Eucharist the immense love of the Heart of Christ" which invites us to union with Him<sup>x</sup>.

This must be the journey of Advent, a journey which leads us to celebrate 'Christ's Mass' with ever greater wonder and joy. May the Holy Year 2025, open the doors of our hearts and help many to discover the Love which awaits us in Confession and in the Mystery of the Eucharist. May we make this 'wholehearted' return to the Heart of Jesus every Sunday of our lives.

+ Mark

Bishop of Shrewsbury

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<sup>i</sup> Lk. 21: 25- 28

<sup>ii</sup> Dilexit Nos No. 87 & 89

<sup>iii</sup> DN No.115

<sup>iv</sup> DN No. 208

<sup>v</sup> Cf. DN No. 182

<sup>vi</sup> Cf. Pope Pius XI quoted in DN. No. 79

<sup>vii</sup> DN No. 57

<sup>viii</sup> DN No. 51

<sup>ix</sup> DN No.26

<sup>x</sup> DN. 84 & 85