



The Visual Piety of the Sacred Heart

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To cite this article: David Morgan (2017): The Visual Piety of the Sacred Heart, Material Religion, DOI: [10.1080/17432200.2017.1302127](https://doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2017.1302127)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2017.1302127>



Published online: 09 May 2017.



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in conversation

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Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus is most commonly associated with Margaret Mary Alacoque, 1647–1690, the French Visitationist nun who experienced the mystical presence of Jesus in several visions between 1673 and 1675. These featured the revelation of his heart, which Jesus removed from his chest to show the enraptured Alacoque. An iconography emerged from her descriptions of the heart as the devotion took root in her convent at Paray-le-Monial in eastern France and at neighboring houses of the Visitation. After her death, the Jesuit Order came to champion the new devotion and a long history of imagery and visual practices took shape, which I have described elsewhere (Morgan 2008, 2012). Although Saint Margaret Mary Alacoque, canonized in 1920, has shaped the modern devotion to the Sacred Heart, in fact she crafted her devotion from a long tradition of special regard for the heart of Jesus. She implies this in her *Autobiography* when she relates that “Once when I was looking at a picture of the great Saint Francis of Sales, it seemed to me that he called me ‘his daughter’ and cast upon me a look so full of paternal love that I no longer regarded him otherwise than as ‘my good father’” (Alacoque 1986, 43). This passage alerts us to an important aspect at work in Alacoque’s experience. Her experience can be characterized as powerfully visualist, something I want to suggest remains a singular feature in the history of visual piety associated with the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Francis of Sales (1567–1622), Bishop of Geneva, was the founder of the Order of the Visitation, Alacoque’s order, and urged devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus among the nuns over whom he had charge. The contemporary French promoter of devotion to the Sacred Heart of Mary in tandem with the Sacred Heart of Jesus was Jean Eudes (1601–1680), who founded the Congregation of Jesus and Mary in 1643. Eudes described the heart of Jesus as an “infinitely ardent furnace of

divine love” (*fournaise infiniment ardente du divin amour*), which he himself took directly from Saint Bernardine of Sienna (1380–1444), who described the heart of Jesus as “a very ardent furnace of love [*fornacem ardentissimae charitatis*] to enflame and ignite the entire universe” (Eudes 1908, 208–209). Alacoque noted on one occasion that Jesus appeared to her with flames emerging from “his adorable bosom, which resembled an open furnace and disclosed to me his most loving and most admirable heart, which was the living source of these flames” (Alacoque 1986, 70). Almost everything she experienced reiterates a long chain of motifs extending backward to the later Middle Ages. This entrainment of motifs balances old and new, crafting the image as a link within the continuity of Catholic devotion even while updating it within the immediate experience of the faithful. Seeing served as a fundamental form of piety by inserting the devotee within an expanding web of relationships and remediations.

The visual piety at work in Alacoque is unmistakable. Images are not inanimate signifiers, but active agents that shape and structure the experience of saints, self, and the divine. Not only did the image of Francis of Sales speak to and gaze at her, Alacoque was instructed by her novice-mistress at the Visitation house in Paray-le-Monial to practice mental prayer by placing herself “before Our Lord like a blank canvas before a painter” (Alacoque 1986, 51). Never content merely to do what she was taught, Alacoque personalized the visual practice as a tutoring from Jesus himself. Redeploying an iconographical motif used in Jesuit devotional books (Figure 1), Alacoque described how the “interior voice” of Jesus taught her that “the canvas was my soul whereon He wished to paint all the features of His suffering life” (1986, 52). The motif of the soul imitating Christ by painting his labored ascent to Calvary forms the basis of Boetius à Bolswert’s 1630 engraving (Figure 1), where the painter-Christian is taught the message he sees and portrays by an angel to his right, who points to scripture. Another angel points to the scene of Christ’s crucifixion while the painter himself depicts Christ bearing his cross. The act of seeing and representing is cast as a moral emulation, a visual participation in Christ’s agony. *Venute post me*, come after me, the suffering savior says, as an assembly of disciples take up their crosses to follow him to Calvary.

Likewise for Alacoque, Jesus was the commanding viewer of her canvas-soul, making the soul as Jesus’ own work of art. According to Alacoque, “His pure and penetrating (Eyes) discover even the smallest faults against charity and humility” (1986, 65). Her ascetic practice consisted of a kind of radical mimesis, in which she sought to cancel out or erase herself. In this her own visibility was

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Material Religion

DOI: 10.1080/17432200.2017.1302127

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FIG 1
 Boetius à Bolswert, *The Christian as Artist*, from Antoine Sucquet, *Via Vitae Aeternae*. Antwerp: Henry Aertissius, 1630, plate 25. Photograph by David Morgan.

3 something to transcend. Jesus set before her his own portrait in order that she might not forget the gift of his love in the vision of his Sacred Heart. In doing so, she reported, Jesus “discovered to me this repulsive picture, which contained a summary of my whole being” (1986, 75). She understood suffering as the basis for her approaching likeness with Christ, her unrelenting and demanding lover. The pain and love are clearly registered in the emblem of a Valentine’s heart encircled by a crown of thorns (Figure 2), which Alacoque had reproduced, displayed in her convent, and distributed as a means of promoting devotion to the Sacred Heart over the last decade of her life. Thus, the first depiction

of the Sacred Heart did not represent the mystical event in pictorial terms, but rather as an emblem, a symbolic device that conveyed simultaneously the amorous mystical relation of the nun’s relation to Jesus and the visceral nature of suffering identified with the suffering of Christ’s crucifixion.

The power of imagery to capture and convey the somatic character of Alacoque’s mystical love was clearly at work at every stage of her spiritual formation and journey. On one occasion Jesus held before her two portraits: one portraying “a life of peace spent in the enjoyment of interior and exterior consolation; the other a “picture of a life of suffering in mind and body.” Compelled

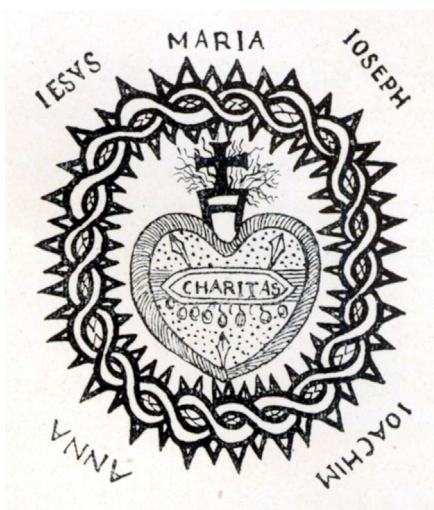


FIG 2
 Saint Margaret-Mary Alacoque, *The Sacred Heart of Jesus*, 1688, engraving on paper. Public domain. Photograph by David Morgan.

to choose between the two, Alacoque accepted the latter image and pressed it to her heart: "I felt it so strongly imprinted on me, that I seemed no longer to be aught but a compound of all I had seen portrayed therein" (1986, 79). This visual piety also consumed actual imagery and transformed it into the internal medium of mystical revelation. Thus, the popular motif of the Trinity showing three identical figures, later condemned as heretical in a papal brief issued by Benedict XIV in 1745, was what Alacoque reported as a mystical revelation to her: "They appeared to me under the form of three young men clad in white and radiant with light, all being of the same age, height, and beauty" (1986, 73). Thus, in her visual piety, pictures became the means of imagination, serving as the medium for visionary experience, and visionary experience issued in the endorsement of imagery as productive of piety and devotion.

4 For this reason, Alacoque devoted herself in the last decade of her life to establishing the Sacred Heart as a devotion invested in an iconography displayed on the person of devotees and on altars dedicated to the Sacred Heart. She insisted that Jesus would shower blessings "on every place where an image of this Sacred Heart shall be honored, because His love urges Him to dispense the inexhaustible treasures of His sanctifying and salutary graces to all souls of good will" (Alacoque 1954, 203). Devotion to the Sacred Heart was understood in terms of a sacred economy of reparations for insults to the Heart and the Eucharist. The image took on a key role in this economy as the focus for

paying devotion to the Sacred Heart and in the spread of the devotion far beyond France after Alacoque's death.

Alacoque had focused her efforts on establishing the devotion among the convents of the Order of the Visitation, which increasingly established shrines to the Heart that included images like the one endorsed by Alacoque herself (see Figure 2). Her Jesuit supporters took their devotion to the Sacred Heart into the far-flung world of their missions, schools, and religious and lay spirituality, as did other orders (see Napolitano and Woets here). The history of lay devotion to the Sacred Heart is replete with appeal to imagery of the Heart for blessing and favors. A Jesuit priest in nineteenth century India gave a picture of the Sacred Heart to members of a village threatened by a cholera epidemic, instructing them to carry it in procession through the village on the next Sunday, promising that the idolators living in the village would not prevent them from doing so (Keller 1899, 127). The power of one brand of imagery over a rival religion's imagery is an ancient feature of religious competition. Alacoque, for instance, was tormented on one occasion by Satan who appeared to her in a vision "under the appearance of a frightful Moor, his eyes flashing like two live coals and gnashing his teeth at me" (Alacoque 1986, 80).

The image of the Sacred Heart in the lay Catholic world commonly worked in the familiar realm of the home. Robert Orsi recounts a Nebraska woman's memory of her dying mother: a priest who came to her bedside at home in the 1920s "cut a small piece of a holy card of the Sacred Heart of Jesus" and placed it in the dying woman's mouth (Orsi 2016, 113). Recalling Alacoque's explicit association of the Sacred Heart with the Eucharist, the priest's action suggests a kinship between image and the sacramental body of Christ. The power of the image encountered in the childhood home exerted itself over time in the form of memories carried into adulthood. An account in a French newspaper, published in 1879, reported the memories of a man regarding the image of the Sacred Heart in his childhood home. He recalled the image's delayed effect in his conversion later in life. The picture operated as an emotional technology buried in memory: "My dear mother had placed over the statue of Our Lady in our sitting-room a beautiful picture of the Sacred Heart, before which she would make us, when we were children, say our morning and night prayers. She never failed to say to us 'Jesus sees you, and if you are not good He will drive you out of His Sacred Heart'" (Keller 1899, 238–239). Visiting Paray-le-Monial as a wandering, unemployed ex-soldier, he went to the convent of the Visitation, Alacoque's house, with the intention to accost a priest with his irreverent unbelief. But when the

priest asked him about his mother, his resolve faltered: "My mother! You speak to me of my mother!" the man replied. "Ah, it is true what she used to tell us about the Sacred Heart of Jesus! I see the picture of the Sacred Heart before which I knelt in my innocence, as a little child, by that mother's side" (1899, 244). The emotional instrument of the memory unleashed a cascade of repressed feelings that resulted in the man's contrition and conversion.

Whether as a device to combat the plague or as an instrument for activating memories, the image of the Sacred Heart was frequently put to work in a visualist paradigm. Seeing the image or being seen by it situated the human being within a complex linkage of image, memory, imagination, feeling, emotion, place, person, savior, parent, priest, and visionary nun. Together, they form a web of agencies orchestrated by the image of the Sacred Heart.

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