



**The Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance,
but the Lord looks on the heart. 1 Sam 16:7**

The Sacred Heart of Jesus

There is no image that speaks more powerfully of Catholic devotional practice than the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Dedication to the Sacred Heart has a rich history, evident in the countless religious communities, churches, shrines, and religious institutions, and in the iconography, prayers, hymns, and devotional traditions associated with it. Yet, despite this extensive history, few would deny that devotion to the Sacred Heart has suffered cardiac arrest in our times. For many today, attention to the Sacred Heart seems outdated in a church that is biblically grounded and ecumenically conscious. Nevertheless, numerous indications point to a revitalization of the divine heart at the center of the church. If the energetic pulse of this palpable expression of divine love is to be restored, its recovery must be nourished with the healthy diet of sacred Scripture.

The heart of God, the heart of the incarnate Word, and the hearts of God's people are recurrent symbols throughout Scripture. In the biblical writings, the heart is the center of a person, the core of one's inner life and personality. It is the source of one's deepest motivation, decisions, memories, and desires. For this reason, the heart is the place in which a person encounters God, in which God works to cause conversion, enlightenment, and renewed life.

2 THE SACRED HEART OF JESUS

The Sacred Heart is the potent symbol of divine love discovered in human flesh. It is the center of the redemptive love of Christ for the world, the source from which God's grace flows to renew humanity. A biblical spirituality of the heart, freed from sentimentality, can become again a powerful source of renewal for Christ's church. Revitalized and invigorated, the divine heart can become the ecumenical expression of a new movement of justice and charity in the world, of a new civilization of love.

Reflection and discussion

- What is attractive to me about the image of the Sacred Heart? Why is it such an ideal metaphor for divine love?
- Why is the image of the Sacred Heart displayed as both wounded and glorious?

The Heart Is the Center

People are always more fascinated by what is outside themselves than by the unique, creative world within the human heart. But biblical wisdom teaches us that the quality of a person depends on the quality of that person's heart. All of a person's external behavior is determined by this interior center. A human heart can become hardened, remain closed in on itself, and become the heart of a fool. On the other hand, the heart can be the place where we experience joy, gratitude, wisdom, and abundant life. So God takes a special

interest in our hearts; it is the part of the person that God alone can see. It is important that we keep watch over our hearts because the formation of our hearts requires attention and listening. As Proverbs says, “Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life” (Prov 4:23).

In ancient times, not much was known about the heart as a physical organ. Yet the people of the ancient world knew that the rhythmic beating of the heart coincided with all the functions of life and its cessation meant death. They knew that they could hear and feel the pulsing of the heart, but they also discerned that they could listen to the heart and feel its movements in a far deeper sense. They recognized that the heart was the font from which flowed all the most important aspects of a person’s being, including understanding, feeling, and willing. So listening to the heart and feeling its interior movements was critical to self-understanding and truly knowing another.

According to the biblical literature, emotions, moods, and passions come from the heart. The heart can flow with joy, hatred, sincerity, fear, anger, trust, and grief. The psalmist tells his listeners to delight in God, for “he will give you the desires of your heart” (Ps 37:4). The heart is also the seat of human understanding, the repository of wisdom, the storehouse of memories; it considers things carefully, and has depths that are seemingly limitless. The more recent insight of Blaise Pascal conforms to the understanding of the ancients: “The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing.”

In the Bible, the heart is always the center of a person’s relationship with God. It is the heart that speaks to God, that trusts in God, that prays to God, and that receives God’s word. As the psalmist sings, “God knows the secrets of the heart” (Ps 44:21). God can give hearts understanding and inspire them to action. Ultimately, only God can truly change the human heart, and genuine conversion of heart awaits the action of God, when God will write his will on human hearts (Jer 31:33) and replace hardened hearts with hearts of flesh (Ezek 36:26). God can open the heart to listen (Acts 16:14), and God can shine his glory into our hearts (2 Cor 4:6). God strengthens our hearts in holiness (1 Thes 3:13), and God’s Spirit dwells in our hearts (2 Cor 1:22).

Reflection and discussion

- In what way does the quote by Augustine, “Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee,” express a biblical understanding of the heart?

- What does it mean to really listen to my heart? If I could take my heart away for a few days, what would it want to say to me?

Close to the Heart of God

If every human heart has unique and mysterious depths that only God can know, how much more wondrous must be the divine depths of the heart of Jesus. At the center of his being was his filial love for the Father, an intimate, confident, obedient relationship between Father and Son. John’s gospel introduces Jesus as “God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart” (John 1:18). Jesus surrendered himself freely and joyfully to the will of his Father, and everything he said and did flowed from this self-offering. The words of the psalmist were truly on his lips and in his heart: “I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart” (Ps 40:8). Jesus was so united with the Father’s heart that he knew God’s will within his heart and followed it by loving humanity to the utmost.

In sending his Son into the world, God revealed to us the full depth of his love in a definitive way (1 John 4:9–10). Jesus is the incarnation of God’s love; teaching, healing, forgiving, and laying down his life with love that couldn’t

be greater. The infinite, divine love that filled the heart of Jesus was poured out upon all humanity to show the universality of God's love. It is this love that has been "poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit" (Rom 5:5). The Spirit that had so filled the heart of Jesus has been sent by God "into our hearts" (Gal 4:6) so that we too can be children of the Father and so that we can love with his love.

The New Testament teaches us how to read the prayers of the psalmist as expressions of the heart of Jesus. Frequently prayed on the lips of Jesus, the psalms articulate his trust in the Father, his compassion for humanity, and his intense suffering for our redemption. While suffering on the cross, Jesus cried out in the depth of his being, expressing the agony of his breaking heart: "My heart is like wax; it is melting within my breast" (Ps 22:14). Tormented and at the point of death, Jesus felt the desolation of the psalmist: "Insults have broken my heart, so that I am in despair. I looked for pity, but there was none; and for comforters, but I found none" (Ps 69:20). But the psalms also express the joyful heart of Christ who knows that he will not be left in the place of death: "My heart is glad and my soul rejoices, for you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit" (Ps 16:9–10). Both Peter (Acts 2:31) and Paul (Acts 13:35) quote this psalm as witness to the Lord's resurrection. These and many other verses from Israel's psalms and prophets express the innermost dispositions found in the sacred heart of Israel's Messiah.

Through the centuries, Christians have sought to learn from the heart of Jesus in order to imitate his virtues. Inspired by his invitation, "Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart" (Matt 11:29), his followers have tried to make their hearts like that of Christ. Christians have also realized that God will mold their hearts when they stay close to the heart of Jesus. The beloved disciple of John's gospel offers the model for this intimacy of the heart as he reclines on the breast of Jesus (John 13:23, 25), just as Jesus was always close to the Father's heart (John 1:18).

The renewal of our hearts is ultimately a gift that flows from the heart of Jesus. During the feast in which his fellow Jews remembered the water that flowed from the rock in the wilderness (Exod 17:6) and anticipated the water that would gush from the temple in the final age (Ezek 47), Jesus proclaimed that rivers of living water would flow from his heart (John 7:38). This ancient promise of God was fulfilled at the death of Jesus on the cross. In his hour of glory, the side of Jesus was pierced with a lance, unleashing the saving water

and redeeming blood that flowed from his deepest core. From his eternally wounded heart, life-giving graces would flow into the hearts of all those who put their faith in him.

Reflection and discussion

- In what ways did Jesus show us that God's love is infinite and universal?
- How could I use these biblical truths to develop a spirituality of the heart?

The Pierced and Enflamed Heart

The wounded yet glorified heart of Christ is a powerful image that expresses the love of God for us and evokes love of God from us. As the very center of the crucified yet risen Lord, his sacred heart continues eternally to pulse with love for humanity. During his life, he taught us to love as he loved, and at his death, he gave us the grace to love with his love.

Though images of the divine heart of Jesus vary from age to age and from one culture to another, the sacred heart is usually depicted as both pierced and on fire with love. Often ringed with a crown of thorns and flowing with blood and water, the heart is also radiant and flaming. Though Christ is raised and glorious, his wounds remain forever. The flame does not consume the wooden crown or cauterize the wound in his heart. This paradoxical image expresses the nature of Christ's eternal love for us.

In John's gospel, the risen Christ appears to his disciples with the wounds in his hands and his side. He invites Thomas to place his hand in his pierced side (John 20:27). Though Jesus is glorified, the vestiges of his suffering

remain eternally. This same reality is expressed with mystical symbolism in the book of Revelation. There the Lamb is depicted in heaven, “standing as if it had been slaughtered” (Rev 5:6). The Lamb of God is both victorious and slain, bearing the glorified marks of sacrifice forever.

God does not take away suffering, failure, and pain from our lives, but he invites us to unite our hearts with his own. In that union of hearts, our sufferings can become redemptive. Our failures can become the means to our growth and our ability to help others who struggle. Our pains can give us deeper compassion and impel us to become healers for others. Our suffering can become the means to unite us more deeply to Christ and transform us into a source of strength and hope for others.

Our secular tendency is to try to deny pain and make suffering go away. But covering up our wounds may deny us their deeper gifts. When we unite our hearts to the heart of Christ, we will know that our suffering is never wasted. Our hurts can be transformed so that they no longer destroy us, but allow us to realize our essential goodness and live our lives in new ways. When we open our lives to this transformation, we are drawing near to the heart of God.

Reflection and discussion

- What is the reason for the contradictory imagery associated with the Sacred Heart?

- In what way does suffering become redemptive? What examples have I experienced?

A Spirituality of the Heart

While there is no specific mention of adoration of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in the biblical period of early Christianity, we find within the Scriptures all the central ideas and images which fostered the devotion to develop in later centuries. Because of “the boundless riches of Christ” (Eph 3:8), God’s word continues to unfold its abundance from age to age. In this study, we will explore the heart of God, the heart of Christ, and the hearts of God’s people in the Bible in order to come to experience more deeply the divine love that we are privileged to claim.

The Sacred Heart, pierced and flowing with living streams of blood and water, is a threshold inviting us into the experience of divine love. There are living springs within our own hearts that can sometimes get silted. A reflective and prayerful meditation on these Scriptures offers us a rich spirituality of the heart than can renew our lives and revitalize this rich devotion for our contemporary world.

Prayer

Compassionate and merciful God, you have created our hearts to be oriented toward you. Turn my heart to your word and open my heart to share the life of your Son. Renew me with your Holy Spirit and release the springs of life to flow from my heart. Enlighten and encourage me as I read and contemplate your inspired word in these sacred Scriptures. Show me how to make my life a testimony to your love.