

Solemnity of the Sacred Heart June 7, 2013

“Heart speaks to heart.” That was John Henry Newman’s motto. It applies not only to liturgy, but to daily discourse. Perhaps we could try to speak *from* the heart *to* the heart—seriously but not ponderously, sometimes lightheartedly.

The motto derives from Jesus’ words, “from the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matthew 12.34). He was actually speaking about the impure heart, with its cruel and careless words. But he may have thought of Jeremiah’s proverb (17.9), “the heart is mysterious above all things; who can understand it?” You must examine your heart to understand it. But when you speak from and then listen, you learn more than you do on your own. So why not try it, when time on earth is limited both for the heart I wish to speak to, and the one I speak from?

These thoughts assume that the Sacred Heart does not belong exclusively to Jesus. He can expand ours so that it incorporates his. The idea derives from the Ezekiel prophecy we hear at Easter vigil (36.26): “I will take from your body your stony hearts and replace them with natural hearts, so that you can be my people and I can be your God.”

It’s easier to have a stone heart because then it will never be broken. The psalms, especially the laments, are very aware of the broken or damaged heart. At the noblest, this applies to the contrite heart—which God will not spurn. But it also includes lesser disappointments, which, it must be admitted, we often cause or contribute to ourselves. These too need healing. St Paul gives a paradigm for the chain reaction of steps to heal the broken heart. “Suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope—and hope does not disappoint us when God’s love is poured into our hearts” (Romans 5.3-5).

That image of pouring, with its lavish and refreshing qualities, is worth pondering. It becomes explicit in an obscure passage of John’s gospel, when Jesus goes to Jerusalem secretly. “On the last and great day of the festival, Jesus stood up and said, ‘let anyone who thirsts come to me and drink.’ As scripture says, ‘out of his heart shall flow rivers of water.’ He said this about the Spirit, which believers were to receive. But as yet there *was* no Spirit, for Jesus had not been glorified” (John 7.37-39). This passage is difficult, for as far as we know there *is* no scripture like the one Jesus quotes. And if it describes not just the historical Pentecost, it might mean that there is no Spirit *for us* until we have been glorified. And the gospels tell us that Christ was not glorified without suffering.

This throws into bold relief the background of the African-American spirituals. The slaves sang *because* they suffered. “Every time I feel the Spirit moving in my heart, I will pray.” Thomas Merton rightly warned against the very possible distortion that makes Christianity into masochism. Nevertheless, the heart may grow dead, cold, and dry if we close it against the suffering of the world, of our neighbor, of our self.

Today’s story of the lost sheep is prelude to Jesus’ most profound teaching on the heart, the parable of the Prodigal Son. In it we see the greedy heart demanding its inheritance, the foolish heart which gives in to the demand, the hungry heart which takes its shame home, the steadfast heart waiting for this to happen, the intolerant heart which resents the music and dancing, the overflowing heart which sees below the surface and makes the announcement: “you were dead and are alive; you were lost and are found.”

To see below the surface and to become the overflowing heart is a worthy goal. To pursue it, we must mean it when we sing, “Every time I feel the Spirit moving in my heart, I will pray.” We must respond when we feel the Spirit move.

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