

Feast of the Sacred Heart.

A Heart for Mission.

School of the Heart of Christ

Any renewal of our life and mission based on our spirituality means a re-visitation of our current spirituality which has, for centuries, inspired the Church by making use of the image of the Heart of Jesus as the human disclosure of God's love.

Characteristic of this spiritual heritage that (our Founder) left his Institute is the encounter between a mystical contemplation of the Heart of Christ, according to the spiritual currents of his day, and the awareness of very serious social problems arising at the very beginning of the age of industrialism that brought him to his commitment to transform society. The symbolism or iconography of the Heart is the point at which life and mission converge, whether we look at God and his saving action or at our efforts at transforming society.

The spirituality of the Heart of Jesus can be looked at from three fundamental aspects: an integral vision of man (*anthropology*) and of the mystery of God (*theology*) from which flows the *responsibility* of building the world upon Gospel foundations.

Heart, or Integral Vision of Man (anthropology)

This integral vision of the Christian mystery should flow from biblical anthropology, wherein the heart represents the very center and identity of the person as opposed to any superficiality or fragmentation; a person's inner self and truth as opposed to any reductionism or usefulness to others; a person's responsibility and dignity as opposed to any alienation, exploitation or injustice.

In fact, in the Bible the heart is the symbol and image of an individual person's truth and thinking rather than of his affect; these are always somehow secret and known only to God the creator who knows them from within (Pss. 7:10; 26:2; 139). Thus, the heart represents the possibility of transcendence and dialog; it is the sanctuary where God speaks to man (Os. 2:14...) and out of which man can open up himself to hearing and praising his creator (Ps. 9:2). Conversely, the heart can also express an exclusion of God (Ps. 10:3...), be a source of evil that leads to destruction of God's plan and of mankind (cf. Gen. 6:5). Hence, the outcome of this situation of needing salvation is based on the gift of a new heart, invested by the Spirit of God and capable of understanding and operating by new criteria (Ez. 36:26ff). Therefore, the gift of a heart that is wise, whole, truthful, open to God, loyal in its relations with others, becomes the object of desire, training, prayer throughout the "wisdom" books (cf. Ps. 90:12).

Biblical anthropology opens us to new perspectives on the incarnation. Jesus, the new Adam (cf. Rom. 5:12ff) realizes the prophecy of Ezekiel about the New Heart, inhabited by the fullness of the Spirit of God. He is the new man, with a Heart totally attentive to hearing out the Father, doing his will, and totally one with mankind, whose brother he is, and who is able to bring life to the fullest to men and women.

The "*ecce venio*" (Heb. 10:5-7) and the pierced heart (cf. Jo. 19:31-37) from the beginning and end of Jesus' earthly existence and the most transparent revelation of this plan for a new man, one who is faithful to God and in solidarity with men and women, even to giving his life for them is in clear distinction to the first Adam who rejects God's plan and becomes the assassin of his brother. In Jesus' life and redemptive death, we have not only an example to follow but the possibility of being conformed to his person through the life and the Spirit which flow from his open side.

Heart of Christ, Revelation of the Father

Through this New Man we also have access to the face of God; the anthropology of the new Adam thus opens itself to theology. The first Adam was already under the protective and educative hand of his Creator. But now, it is through the Heart of Christ, – i.e., his interior life, the mystery of

his person as son of man and son of God – that we can perceive the mystery of God himself in the measure that he is revealed in his son. The heart of Jesus becomes the road to Father, His and ours. And the center (heart) in the one we discover by walking this path is the God that is love (1Jo 4: 6-21).

Thus we rediscover that the person of Jesus, upon his arrival in the world until his return to the Father, is the manifestation of the love of God for humankind. His actions and approach toward the sickly and oppressed, friends or adversaries, his words, the hopes he tenders, his proclamation, are all manifestations of the Heart of God and his way of looking upon and treating mankind. The heart of Christ thus becomes door and path to the heart of God, whether as revelation of the Father or as opportunity for communion with him through the Spirit.

Action from the Heart

A characteristic of this New Man, the revelation of the Heart of God, is solidarity with mankind, sharing his nature and taking upon himself their weaknesses and sufferings (cf. Jo. 1:2, 14; Philipp. 2:6-8). Communion with God, rather than distancing him from sinners, sufferers, and oppressed, makes him present in solidarity to share their weak condition as well as allow them to share his Spirit; in his humanity he thus opens up for them a way to hope and life (cf. Heb. 4:14-16; 5:5-10; 10:5-12).

As was the case with Jesus, so also with us, the gift of the Spirit engenders a heart not only open and capable of communion with God, but one also in solidarity with all men and women and capable of taking upon itself their hopes and troubles and working actively toward building up a new humanity. In this way, his Heart – i.e., his way of thinking and acting – is an ideal and a way for the human heart to build up a new humanity. Thus, in Matthew's text, after presentation as the one who lifts up man from his weakness, Jesus invites us to learn from Him to model our heart after his in the spirit of the beatitudes: "Come to me, all whose work is hard, whose load is heavy: and I will give you relief. Bend your necks to my yoke, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble-hearted" (Mt. 11:28ff).

A Missionary Heart

From a configuration to Christ, the New Man, our vocation and mission proceed. Moved by the Spirit, we take on the two-fold aspect that was the mark of Jesus' life and mission and that (our Founder) sought to imitate and pass on to the congregation: a heart that is open and ready to listen to the voice of God, ready to do his will; and one equally full of solidarity with mankind, to work for the transformation of society according to God's plan.

An awareness and communion with God that allow us to discover his will and make us disposed to accomplish it is found at the basis of our mission. Hearing and sharing the word, participation at the Eucharistic table with continuation at adoration, all make up the basic means of staying united with Christ like branches to the vine (Jo. 15) according to our tradition. These practices help us recognize along the way or on the lakeside beach our Risen Christ who gives us comforting and helpful words, gives us the food of unity and hope, repeats his invitation to follow him in service to his people (cf. Lk. 24; Jo. 21).

The second great disposition characteristic of the new man remade in the image of Christ is a heart in solidarity with the brethren, liberated from isolation and egoism, open to communion, available for the sharing and gift of oneself. Such characteristics are especially important among those who accept the invitation to mission. Beyond being the necessary means of mutual understanding and support, a communion among them serves as credible testimony to the presence of the Spirit and a declaration of the possibility of building up a social order that is both conciliatory and fraternal amongst a diversity of persons, cultures, and languages. Hence, for us community becomes a point of departure, a methodology, and the goal of any mission.

One specific quality of the gift of the Risen Christ is the universal and multi-cultural dimension of communion. The mission of the church, ever since Pentecost, is to extend to all

peoples and languages as an expression of the love of the heart of Christ who reaches out to all as the way to the goal of a reconciled humanity of brothers and sisters. The international dimension of religious institutes like ours, in their life and mission, constitutes a valid contribution to the catholicity of the church and is a seed in God's plan for reconciling all peoples in Christ.

Attention to the heart – to the integrity and inner core of every person – is a mark of our mission which thus avoids reducing a person to mere appearance or potential usefulness. The purpose of a mission in service of the Gospel is the promotion of the human person and a society in completeness of life and dignity, open to the transcendence of the Risen Christ. It cannot be reduced to an ephemeral mysticism or be inattentive to the evils that afflict human beings, nor to a promotion of a society that ignores the transcendent dimension and hope in the final destiny of man.

A welcome and an attentiveness to persons in the actual situation in which they find themselves are the chief expressions of the coming of the Kingdom of God. The forgotten, the suffering, the oppressed, the discouraged are the very first ones that should experience fraternal solidarity from those who proclaim the Good News, as happened in Galilee (cf. Lk. 4:16-22). This preferential option for the poor, which marked the proclamation of the Gospel from the very beginning, does not imply a bias for one class that excludes the rest. It rather is an expression of the universality of God's love which excludes no one, not even the smallest of the small, and conveys a fullness of compassion for those who suffer or are forgotten.

Solidarity with the New Man prevents us from making our proclamation into some kind of imposition of power or occasion for expressing cultural domination. Mission is a service and a gift of oneself and includes a total renunciation from whatever form of violence and imposition. Such a plan for persons and society can only be offered and accepted in joy and freedom. Coercion would generate fanatical slaves or vengeful rebels rather than free and friendly brothers and sisters.

An attitude of fidelity to God's plan and of solidarity with mankind in addition to a renunciation of violence in building up the Kingdom implies a renunciation of oneself and of making one's own life a gift of peace and fraternity. It also implies a readiness to undergo the consequences from resistance and opposition that frequently accompany the nativity of the new humanity.

Following the Good Shepherd who gives his life for his sheep (cf. Jo. 10), the history of the church is replete with men and women who have sealed their gift to their brothers and sisters with their own blood. The history of our much younger congregation also presents us with not a small number of members who united their own oblation to Christ's to the point of shedding their blood. We remember our brothers today with deep emotion and faith. They are not dead. They live in the churches that they helped establish, in the brothers and sisters they served, in the memory of our brothers, and above all in the Heart of the Lord Jesus whom they followed to the death. Whoever offers his own life in this manner does not lose it. A mission can take one to places near or far, planting and being planted among so many different peoples, cultures, languages, but the Lord, who has called them, will never lose sight of their footsteps. Even if their tired bodies should fall on unknown lands, "He will send out the angels and gather his chosen from the four winds, from the farthest bounds of earth to the farthest bounds of heaven" (Mk. 13:27)...

May, in the celebration of the feast of the Sacred Heart, the Good Shepherd who gives his life for his sheep, make us like him and guide us in our mission to build up his Kingdom.

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