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Responding to the Challenges of Life with a Spirituality of the Heart

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Two foundations for a spirituality of the heart are God’s unconditional love for humans¹, and the God-given love within believers – “God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit”². Coming to believe and trust in these two aspects of love in the difficulties of life is part of the lifelong spiritual journey.

This paper analyses how a spirituality of the heart can assist Christians today in responding to the challenges (which can also be seen as opportunities) of everyday life, including belonging to a church. A framework for heart spirituality consisting of the following six perspectives is used: (1) incarnational, (2) relational, (3) compassionate (4) contemplative, (5) transformational, and (6) mystical.³ In each dimension, demanding life issues are first mentioned and then addressed via a heart-centred spirituality.

An Incarnational Perspective

Unexpectedly, major health problems strike – such as diagnosis of cancer, a serious heart condition, or the onset of a degenerative disease. In such instances, an incarnational spirituality of the heart can assist in realizing that the body, mind, and spirit are intimately connected – and that “the human is the gateway to the Divine”.⁴ For that reason, an element in the healing process may become developing a new awareness of the body, and

¹ *NIV Study Bible*, 2413. 1 John 4:16 – “And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him.”

² *Ibid.*, 2172. Romans 5:5 – “And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.”

³ James Maher, *The Way of the Heart* (Kensington, NSW: Chevalier Institute, 2003), 1-2. Maher describes four of these dimensions in his article. I have added two more: the compassionate perspective and the mystical perspective.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

mindfully monitoring one's inner states. Some also choose to enrich their spiritual life through body-oriented "spiritual practices", such as Yoga or Tai Chi.⁵

In later life, a person may find themselves beset with feelings of meaninglessness, emptiness, and depression, as well as neuroses and psychological imbalances – all these result from a lifetime lived under the tyranny of their ego.⁶ This ego, or false self, arises in childhood through coping with life's imperfections.

An incarnational spirituality of the heart recognizes that there is a true self deep within, though while damaged, is not dead. One does not have to remain hopelessly stuck in a self-destructive cycle, being the victim of one's own ego and others' egos.⁷ Negative emotions, such as fear, cynicism, jealousy, and resentment, can be transcended in the journey back to the true self, which is the journey home to God. Such awakening to the true heart enables one to connect with the power of love that dwells within. And so, in reaching the "soul-space where God lives", the ego with its insecurities, anxieties, and false images can be tamed.⁸

Christians can also find themselves buffeted by competing values and pressures in life, leading to guilt, confusion, and frustration. For some, part of the problem is viewing life in terms of a sharp dichotomy between the sacred and the secular, and which then generates an escapist mentality toward the human condition and its struggles.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Daniel O'Leary, *Travelling Light* (Dublin: The Columba Press, 2001), 20.

⁷ Ibid., 22.

⁸ Ibid., 15.

An incarnational spirituality of the heart encourages believers to find God in their own hearts, as well in activities of the world. Being integrated, such a spirituality is therefore both prayerful and prophetic. Christians are able to develop a rich inner life, which in turn naturally leads to efforts on behalf of peace and justice. Important, however, is to “maintain a fruitful tension between prayerful reflection and involvement in the world if [spirituality] is to avoid falling into individualism or becoming a mere humanism.”⁹ In other words, this type of balanced incarnational heart-based spirituality allows believers to find and serve God who is at work in all aspects of human life, even in the ordinary and routine.

A Relational Perspective

In addition to being joyful, relationships can be challenging and bring heartache. Today, separation and divorce are common in the Western world. A spirituality of the heart involves a journey of relationship – with others, and with God, in Jesus. “As disciples of Jesus,” writes Maher, “all our relationships become dimensions of our relationship with him.”¹⁰ Additionally, in relating to others, a person comes to a sense of self and finds their place in the world, as well as allowing others to find theirs.¹¹

When relationships become too strained, frustration and anger can lead to hatred and even physical abuse. Today, violence is increasingly commonplace – such as in domestic violence, road rage, vandalism, and property destruction.

⁹ James Bacik, “Contemporary Spirituality”, in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Michael Downey (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 230. See also: Wilkie Au, *By Way of the Heart* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 11-24.

¹⁰ Maher, *The Way of the Heart*, 1.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

A spirituality of the heart involves a radically transformed heart – one for which any trace of violence is no longer an option. It is a heart that aims for reconciliation, not victory over the “enemy”; that is willing to suffer, in place of inflicting suffering on others; and that is open to grace, the in-breaking of the Spirit of agapic love.¹² To resist and overcome violence, then, a heart inhabited by the heart of God is paramount. Such a heart is able to find and encounter God in all things; to creatively hold in tension the paradoxes of life; to exercise a disarming and transforming gentleness; and to be prepared to take on suffering.¹³

Furthermore, in ecclesiastical settings where authoritarianism exists (based on a male sexist model), relationships can be particularly challenging for women interacting with the hierarchy. Typically, leadership in such situations demands control, insists on submission, fears disloyalty, and downplays a woman’s giftedness or qualifications.¹⁴ In these circumstances, a true spirituality of the heart – characterized by a “heart of flesh”, not a “heart of stone”¹⁵ – can allow women to be liberated. In time, this will manifest as “a spirituality of compassion, of empowerment, of dialogue, of community, of openness, of non-violence, of feeling as well as reason, of circles rather than pyramids.”¹⁶

Another challenge in everyday life is learning to appropriately respond to the most vulnerable in society – including young children, the frail elderly, people in crisis, and the disabled. Taking the physically disabled as an example (such as stroke victims), their

¹² Wendy Wright, *Sacred Heart: Gateway to God* (New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 77-78. These points of non-violence were articulated by Martin Luther King Jr. as he developed his ideas of non-violent resistance.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 78-84.

¹⁴ Joan Chittister, “Heart of Flesh: A Feminist Spirituality for Women and Men”, keynote address at the CTA National Conference, Detroit, 1997.

¹⁵ *NIV Study Bible*, 1630. Ezekiel 36:26 – “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.”

¹⁶ Chittister, “Heart of Flesh”.

bodies typically bear the mark of suffering. Sadly, any rejection and alienation of these people (perhaps even unwittingly) can bring them untold frustration, anxiety, and suffering.

Understanding the priority of the heart in human lives, afforded by a heart-based spirituality, allows one to see the uniqueness and sacredness of the other, whether they have a disability or not. Most importantly, each person is a being with a heart, capable of demonstrating such qualities as joy, tenderness, compassion, forgiveness, reconciliation, and celebration.¹⁷ By contrast, too often, only intellectual abilities (head) and physical productivity (hands) are emphasized. In other words, a spirituality of the heart recognizes that the heart is the foundation of the human person, which is deeper, richer, and more profound than the intellect or productivity. And, since all persons share in the capacities of the heart, the unity and working together of people in friendship, freedom, and justice is possible – including those most wounded and vulnerable in a community.

A Compassionate Perspective

The last decade has been marked by numerous disasters, both manmade (such as acts of terrorism, oil spills, and warfare) and natural (such as earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanoes, droughts, and floods). As appeals for help increase, compassion fatigue also sets in, accompanied by feelings of helplessness in the face of many tragedies and catastrophes.

¹⁷ Michael Downey, “Region of Wound and Wisdom: The Heart in the Spirituality of Jean Vanier and L’Arche”, in *Spiritualities of the Heart*, ed. Annice Callahan (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 187-194.

In such a period of history, a spirituality of the heart can make a significant difference.

Jesus' heart was filled with the Spirit of God. As his disciples, our hearts are also filled with this same Spirit (see 2 Cor 1:21-22 and Gal 4:6).¹⁸ Fallon writes that:

One specific quality of the *heart of Jesus* was the experience others had that *he was deeply moved in his feelings*. The emotions of his heart flowed readily into his feelings . . . Luke speaks of the “tender compassion” (*splanchna*) of God (Luke 1:78). James speaks of the Lord being moved with compassion (James 5:11). Paul says he loves the people in the same moving way as Jesus loves them (Phil 1:8).¹⁹

Accordingly, believers today can also be moved with God-given compassion for others, and to love them as Jesus loves.²⁰

For that reason, in a world where seventy percent are underprivileged and undernourished,²¹ a spirituality of the heart calls for engaging compassionately with those who hurt, reaching out to them with a heart of love. Such a compassionate relationship with the poor and the weak recognizes the reality of Peter van Breemen's words that “the cry of Jesus on the cross is sometimes said to continue in the cry of the poor.”²² In other words, it is in the poor where one finds and meets Christ.

¹⁸ *NIV Study Bible*, 2236, 2262. 2 Cor 1:21-22 – “He [Jesus] anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come [emphasis mine].” Galatians 4:6 – “Because you are sons, God sent the *Spirit of his Son into our hearts*, the Spirit who calls out, ‘Abba, Father’ [emphasis mine].”

¹⁹ Michael Fallon, “Heart in the Scriptures: Notes Towards an Understanding of Heart in the Scriptures”, *Encounter* 37 (1983): 13-14. Jesus' compassion can be seen in the following passages: Lk 7:13, 10:33, 15:20; Mk 1:41, 6:34, 8:2, 9:22; Mt 20:34.

²⁰ Our call to compassionate love can be seen in such Scriptures as: Eph 4:32, Phil 2:1, Col 3:12, 1 Pet 3:8, 1 Jn 3:17.

²¹ Peter van Breemen, “Spirituality of Liberation”, *Review for Religious* 49:6 (1990): 833.

²² *Ibid.*

A Contemplative Perspective

Life can become a series of roller-coaster activities, bringing both joys and struggles, blessing and brokenness. Notwithstanding, a spirituality of the heart “recognizes the human heart as the privileged place of encounter with God.”²³ This shows the need for a contemplative stance, achieved, for example, through a daily habit of reflection – that is, taking time to notice what is happening in body, mind, and spirit, and looking for God’s hand in this.

At a deeper level, a person may feel only sadness, see only absurdity, and experience only despair. “To despair,” writes Finlay, “is to die inside, to lose all hope of ever being the person whom we deep down know ourselves to be in the intimacies of our own moments of spontaneous contemplative experience.”²⁴ The pain experienced in life can take many forms – a psychological disturbance, a troubled marriage, a crisis of faith, a series of illnesses – and result in a sense of *homelessness*, where a person no longer feels at home with themselves.²⁵

Again, a contemplative stance, one of the characteristics of a heart-centred spirituality, can nurture within a person a quiet inner assurance and meaningful sense of direction in life. Also, an appreciation of “the divinity of what just is” is fostered – in other words, living in an “awareness of the divinity of the life we are living”.²⁶ As a result, in glimpsing more

²³ Maher, *The Way of the Heart*, 1.

²⁴ James Finlay, *The Contemplative Heart* (Notre Dame: Sorin Books, 2000), 41.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 39-40.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 19-20.

and more the divinity in daily living or the “inherent holiness of the present moment”, a person learns to return home to themselves.²⁷

A Transformational Perspective

At times, life brings pain, sickness, grief, worry, trauma, depression, or disabilities. In distress, awareness of a spirituality of the heart allows one to journey into the heart which also becomes a journey into woundedness.²⁸ Transformation occurs in realizing that one is not abandoned in woundedness, but rather the heart is where the wounded, compassionate heart of Jesus is encountered.²⁹ This is the place where healing and growth then occurs.

In addition to personal transformation, heart-based spirituality is intimately linked with social transformation.³⁰ This understanding prevents burnout, cynicism, or self-righteousness which results from addressing pressing social concerns *without* a spirituality of the heart as the foundation of the endeavour. On the other hand, a heart-centred spirituality without a social consciousness results in spirituality that is stunted and short-sighted.³¹ In sum, both personal spiritual transformation *and* justice work in societal transformation are needed – or, either effort alone will be “ineffective, irrelevant, and destructive”.³²

²⁷ Ibid., 26.

²⁸ Maher, *The Way of the Heart*, 1.

²⁹ Ibid., 2.

³⁰ Linda Rich, “Living our Liberation Through Justice and Spirituality”, *Review for Religious* 49:6 (1990): 818. Linda Rich states how writers and thinkers in the fields of spirituality and social justice are beginning to meet on mutual ground. Also, North American spirituality writers are linking spirituality with social transformation. In her article, she lists several book titles reflecting this trend.

³¹ Ibid., 821.

³² Ibid., 820.

Further, transformation and development across the life span – from infancy, childhood, adolescence, early adulthood, middle adulthood, to late adulthood – involves inherent critical life tasks, as well as transitions, conflicts, suffering, and crises. These events can be bewildering and bring with them existential *angst*.

A spirituality of the heart that understands life as a *journey*, which also includes an inward journey to where God resides in the depth of one’s being, can alleviate needless anxieties. In this journey inward, “to accept and cherish one’s deepest self [found in the heart] as the image of God is a necessary foundation for beginning and sustaining the journey itself.”³³ Moreover, as a wayfarer, a believer realizes that they will never reach spiritual wholeness or perfection – they are in fact always en route. Equally important is the uniqueness of each person, and that God in his sovereignty may lead them in the depths of their soul along a mysterious path that lies beyond rational observation. Lastly, in their spiritual odyssey, the Christian wayfarer today can draw on manna for their journey from a rich heritage: the Scriptures filled with journey metaphors; the tradition of writings in Christian spirituality; contemporary developments in the human sciences; as well as non-Christian religious traditions that also describe the spiritual journey.³⁴

A Mystical Perspective

Commitment to a church in today’s Western post-modern and secular times is challenging. For many people, attending church no longer meaningfully resonates with their spiritual yearnings. The propositional preaching, the dogmatic proclamation of religious truth, the

³³ Richard Byrne, “Journey: Growth and Development in Spiritual Life”, in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Michael Downey (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 576.

³⁴ *Ibid.* Byrne’s article is a valuable resource in itself, covering (1) biblical foundations of the spiritual journey, (2) historical developments in Christian spirituality, as well as (3) contemporary developments. His summary of implications for spiritual formation is also informative.

display of religious authority, and the counselling with fixed answers do not leave their interior strengthened.³⁵ As a result, people’s religious faith is unable to adequately deal with the challenges they face and is all too readily abandoned.

Furthermore, increasing numbers, no longer content with their church, have abandoned attendance altogether in favour of pursuing a private spiritual journey. Some have been lured away by the New Age phenomenon. A spirituality of the heart, rooted in the love of God, empowers both pastors and lay members to draw alongside fellow parishioners and “to understand the often-silent cry in people’s hearts, which leads them elsewhere if they are not satisfied by the Church.”³⁶

A spirituality of the heart involving a mystical perspective of finding God within is closer to what people are yearning for. This calls for listening “with the ear of the heart to the thoughts that arise from the hearts of others . . . [and to discern] the cry for God, the cry for the fellowship of the Spirit.”³⁷ Such listening is receptive to people’s failures, despair, and pain, as well as their hopes and dreams, and can then lead them to their “heart’s sacred potentials”.³⁸ Heart-centred spirituality of this nature encourages people to recognize traces of the divine within the core of themselves – and to consider God within. Through this type of interior strengthening, people realize that religion is important to their souls, that it has a real and lasting effect, and that it makes a positive difference.

³⁵ David Tacey, “Mysticism: Cornerstone of the Future Church”, *Online Catholics* 94 (2006).

³⁶ David Ranson, “The New Age of Christian Spirituality: Responding to ‘Jesus Christ the Bearer of the Water of Life – A Christian Reflection on the New Age’”, *The Australasian Catholic Record* 81:3 (July 2004): 299.

³⁷ Tacey, “Mysticism: Cornerstone of the Future Church”.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

Conclusion

A spirituality of the heart, when considered from six perspectives – (1) incarnational, (2) relational, (3) compassionate, (4) contemplative, (5) transformational, and (6) mystical – has been shown as a way of living which enables Christians to positively and successfully respond to the crises and opportunities of their daily lives.

Such a spirituality of the heart is a way of being in the world (incarnational); is a journey – travelled with others (relational); is able to recognize Christ in relationships (compassionate); is a way of coming to rest at one's deepest centre (contemplative); is an energy that sustains and moves people (transformational); and is a dance in which humans are participating (mystical).³⁹

³⁹ Maher, *The Way of the Heart*, 1.

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