

Feast of the Sacred Heart: June 19, 2020

What can we say about the Sacred Heart in the midst of a civilizational crisis caused by a virus, when disease and death are all around us, and when like the disciples after the death of Jesus we are huddled inside in fear? Their crisis was the lifeless body of Jesus hanging on a cross, its side pierced by a lance. We can still hear the crisis in the voices of the two disciples fleeing from the place of death: “But we had hoped...” We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel, that he would get us out of the impasse of a life that seemed to go nowhere. But it was not to be. Their hopes were dashed – another false lead! – and they were returning home. Isn’t that our situation as well? We have now been in our upper rooms at 192 Daly, 58 High Park, Blvd Gouin, 1 Darlington, the Séminaire, Square Angus and Frère André for more than three months and death is still all around us. We can’t, like the two disciples, just leave the place of death and return to a safe home and leave all of this behind us. We feel that we cannot let up our vigilance because the virus will only pursue us.

Two months ago, Ron Rollheiser counselled us that we should perhaps look at this pandemic not as a disaster but as an opportunity. It is clear that the pandemic confronts us with our fragility, and with the large number of deaths. It confronts us with our *extremum*, our death. Today, on the Feast of the Sacred Heart, we are asked to allow the figure of the pierced and lifeless body of Jesus on the cross enter into our entrails. It asks us to face death, our death, the death of our civilization, our current history in light of this death. So, on this day let us look with the figure of the pierced side of Jesus.

Let me do it in three points. First, I would like to say something about the role of the devotion of the Sacred Heart in history, second about what the devotion says about my origin, or humanity’s origin, and finally what the devotion says about our being in the world, our cosmos, our country.

A. The role of the devotion in history

The devotion to the Heart of Jesus had its origins in the beginning of modern time. It formed part of the humanist movement which tried in the 17th century to find a new connection with the transcendent after the disastrous failure of the previous century’s Catholic scholastic theology to let the human spirit connect with experience and the world. There had been other attempts to make this connection such as by the brothers of the Common Life in their *The Imitation of Christ*, or in Francis de Sales’ *The Introduction to the Devout Life*, and the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola. The devotion to the Heart of Jesus was one other attempt to infuse the beginning modernity with a spiritual grounding. What early moderns looked for was a new connection of the sacred/faith with human experience. They thought that they found it in the human heart. The anatomical studies of Vesalius – despite the scientifically more accurate findings of William Harvey – had pointed to the human heart as the life-giving energy of

the human body. In the perceived miraculous passage of the blood from the left to the right ventricle in the heart, the heart was perceived as the place where “the vital forces are kindled” where humans derive life and heat, spirit and vitality, where blood becomes humanly alive. It saw a meeting of the transcendent with the immanent in the interior rhythm and origin of the human person. However faulty biologically such an image of the heart, early moderns found there the locus of the human encounter with the transcendent. This reference to the heart became foundational for the devotion to the Sacred Heart. The sacred was to be found at the core of human life and experience. However poorly expressed in the visions of Marguerite Marie Alacoque, and however institutionally manipulated this vision became between the 17th and 20th centuries, this notion of the heart not only as a source of life, but as the receptacle and source of love became the underlying ground of the modern devotion to the Sacred Heart. But it died as a devotion in the 20th century. It lost its foundational experience, its connection with the human body, our cosmic existence. That fact became acknowledged by the encyclical *Haurietis Aquas* of 1956 and by much of the theological writings on the Heart of Christ from 1930 to the present. Not everything: something of its underlying spiritual insight remains valid and worthy of further exploration.

B. Human interiority: the search for our origin

To help us uncover the underlying spirit I point to something in Fr. Dehon that I think is worth our consideration. Fr. Dehon – particularly after age 45 – intuited a broadened scope for the devotion beyond St. Marguerite Marie. He recognized – in continuation with the mystical tradition – that the devotion was an authentic practice of the human soul in relation to the unimaginable excess of God’s love. But he also began to see that this excess of God’s love and mercy had to become a social force – something that could regenerate the social, economic and political life in France. His main concern was to find a way to help deal with the excesses of capitalism and its influence upon workers.

Let me focus for a moment on the interiority that is promoted by the devotion.

Marguerite Marie pointed to a flaming heart of love as a primary symbol of the experience of the divine. At first Fr. Dehon followed her as he found it expressed in the spirit of the Soeurs Servantes of Saint-Quentin. In his later life, in the 1880s and 90s and beyond, he began to name this experience more and more “pure love”. There has been a long tradition in the Church to explore the depths of love. In early modernity pure love was understood as a love without limits, a love that is a total self-gift for the other, a gift of self that in all its purity is willing to go all the way to dying for the other. A totally selfless love. This is the kind of love that Dehon wanted to see lived within the Congregation. With the Theological Commission I have struggled to understand what Dehon meant by this interior force of pure love. Fr. Dehon, I think, was on to something but he did not have the theological language to express it. In Dehon’s time theologians

could not yet name what today we would call eschatology, a way of thinking that allows one to think the divine as it intermingles with human experience. As eschatological, pure love is not something doable, but an expression of the excess of God's love in the language of human activity at its most highly imaginable: love as a total gift. It evokes in us what behind our different experience of our lives and the various encounters with people and things, we might call a summons to a deeper origin, a promise of a new life, of a totally other force and agency. I found an articulation of this force in life in reading my colleague Jim Pambrun's book on Creation in the First Testament, entitled *God's Signature*. His reading of the Books of Wisdom led me to another way of understanding this origin in humans, this interiority.

He made me aware how in the First Testament, at a time when Israel experienced its darkest spiritual and national crisis, in the period of its exile in Babylon, a school of prophets had an intimation in the death and destruction and loss of identity of the time of an origin that defied their immediate experience of death. They intuited in all their misery and loss of hope, the reality of God as the creator God. In their very misery, in the death all around them, in the death of suffering servants of God, they uncovered a faith in a creator God who would re-create them as a people, a God who would restore them and bring them back to their homeland. For Israel, this was the time in which they developed the story of creation which we now find in the book of Genesis, not so much a story of a first creation but of a new creation.

What these prophets asked the people to do was to reach behind their different experiences of life and behind their various encounters with people and things and uncover within themselves a summons to a deeper origin, a promise of new life. The prophets encouraged them to trust that they are carried by an other, that they are not their own origin, that their origin is a relation to another, a gift. This summons to their deeper origin became identified in several writings as Wisdom. What emerges in these writings is a reference to this gift as Wisdom as a reality with God from the beginning, as the darling child of God. At the core of human life, they held, lies the desire to uncover this origin, this other, in the self. There, it said, one would discover that all life was built on a surplus, an excess. My self – as also so many contemporary philosophers have said – emerges as a gift, not as something I possess. It invites the reader to live in a world borne by another, in a world that is constituted by an encounter with an other. It is along these lines that in modern times the devotion to the heart of Christ can be seen as an appeal for people to explore their origins, this time not to a God as creator, but to an encounter with God at our origin as agape, God's love, or to use Dehon's image, "pure love." At my deepest origin, behind all our experiences and encounters there is God's agape, pure love: that is where I encounter my deepest self, that is my origin. Out of that gift, that is my self, I have to trust to live.

- C. But this discovery of the self in the originating love of God also has a social and political thrust. That thrust can be traced back right to the beginning of the devotion with Marguerite Marie, but it became more prominent in Fr. Dehon. Fr. Dehon was someone who at the end of the 19th century began to see how the devotion to God's agape was essential in the enormous transformation of the modern world in the social, economic and political spheres. Within the Catholic tradition, symbolized by pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* (1891), it opened a new way to engage the world of capitalism and liberalism.

Fr. Dehon began a new periodical: *Le règne du Sacré-Coeur dans les âmes et dans les sociétés*. He articulated this vision in the first number: "It is necessary that the cult of the Sacred Heart of Jesus begun in the mystical life of souls, descends and penetrates in the social life of peoples." (Bourgeois, 1994 p.69). For him it is clear: the originating *agape* of God that so shapes the human self is also to give shape to the social, economic, political world. For Dehon the main concern for this love was the world of workers. He took seriously what we also find in Pope Francis' *Evangelii Gaudium* that "God, in Christ, redeems not only the individual person, but also the social relations existing between people" (EG 178) In the context of today's neo-liberalism and capitalism such an insertion of love and gratuity in social relations and in the economy might be hard to imagine and put in place. What would civic life look like with a massive insertion of pure love? It is not totally impossible to conceive, but not in its excess of love. Such care for the other was not totally absent in the way governments tried to take care of the needs of people during COVID-19. But much more is required. Such a social impact of the devotion to the Heart of Christ requires, at a minimum, a cry for justice at the ground floor of our relations with one another. But an insertion of pure love would require more. It would insist, as did Pope Benedict XVI in his *Caritas in veritate*, that this justice intermingle with love, that we deal with one another, at least as we would our brothers and sisters, and, if we could take it a step further, that our justice also display gratuity, generosity to the other. But the Gospels urge us to take a step further. They provide us with an eschatological vision: love as I have loved you – Be perfect as your heavenly Father – the law and the prophets say...but I say... This is the irruption of messianic time: the concentration of God's time/agape in our time.

Fr. Dehon looked for a way of living Christian faith that shifted its emphasis away from the often institutional "totalization of the relationship of the mediation between God and the individual" (M. Neri) to a living individually and socially the origins of human life in God's incomprehensible and unimaginable excess of the mercy of God. That remains our challenge and an option in a time that we seek to rebuild our life together in the midst of the pandemic.

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June 2020: in the time of the pandemic.