

A STRONG AND GENEROUS DEVOTION

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Up until the 1970's, no one gave a second thought to the name, "Priests of the Sacred Heart." In almost every church in the United States there was either a statue of or an altar dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Yet, almost overnight, it seemed, devotional practices, including devotion to the Sacred Heart not only withered, but also appeared embarrassingly old-fashioned. Many people either credit or blame Vatican II, but the Council proved to be a public acknowledgement of new expressions of theology and spirituality that had been simmering for several previous decades.

Sentimentalized, and even gory depictions of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, along with overwrought prayers did little to connect the devotion with daily living. In one *Act of Reparation*, to be prayed on the Feast of the Sacred Heart and on First Fridays, SCJs were to make expiation to Jesus "for the crimes that we ourselves have committed but also for the sins of those who trample upon the vows of their Baptism and shake off the light yoke of Your law." Additionally, SCJs promised to make reparation to Jesus for "immodesty and shameful excesses in life and dress; the many snares of corruption laid for the souls of the innocent; the neglect of holydays; the hateful blasphemies that are hurled against You and Your Vicar on earth; the neglect also of the very Sacrament of Your love, as well as its profanation by horrifying sacrilege." As a minor seminarian, I remember saying that prayer and having no idea to whom or what it referred.

At least in the United States Province, some members were embarrassed to be associated with devotion to the Sacred Heart. If that were not enough, some objected to the word, "Priest" in the title, mistakenly assuming it meant "sacramental priest" instead of an "oblatus," that is, one who makes an offering of himself to God. As an unsatisfactory compromise, the Congregation in the United States began calling itself, "Priests and Brothers of the Sacred Heart."

So, when the Ninth Provincial Chapter, in 1982, began writing a Mission Statement, the Chapter members couldn't even agree on what to call themselves. The only name that could get the approval of all the members was, "American SCJs." In this way, the offending terms, "priest" and "Sacred Heart" were avoided.

With the passing of years, the controversies died down, and the U.S. Province eventually went back to identifying itself as "Priests of the Sacred Heart." The absence of objections, however, does not necessarily suggest a wholehearted embrace of the name or a sufficient

understanding of its meaning. Interestingly, at the international level, the Congregation presently wants to brand itself as “Dehonians.” For all the benefits that this name might hold for marketing purposes, it erases from the name the fundamental expression of its spirituality. I suspect that Fr. Dehon would not be pleased to hear the Congregation referred to by his name rather than by the way its members are united to the Heart of Jesus.

I don’t sense anything sinister in the name changes, but I wonder, “Has the spirituality of the Heart of Jesus lost its energizing power?” Is it just a name, as significant or insignificant as any other image of Jesus? Are we left with a Valentine shaped heart that is a stand-in for the word “love” and which has no more depth of meaning than in the advertisement, “I♥New York”? If your name is no big deal for SCJs, if there are more important things to consider, or if the emphasis is on ministry and community without serious reflection on spirituality, I detect an avoidance that is, no doubt, unconscious. I say this because I believe that for many people, the spirituality of the Heart of Jesus is just too damn challenging.

The image of the Heart of Jesus highlights two very important Christian beliefs. Taken literally, the Heart of Jesus is a real, human, heart of flesh. This fact points to the incarnation: God taking on our human nature and experiencing a body just like we do. Non-Christians find this belief shocking or laughable. Christians have no problem professing this belief, but I wonder if this belief causes us to value and honor our world, our flesh, and our desires, no matter how limiting, conflicting, and sinful they may sometimes be.

Taken symbolically, the Heart of Jesus is the center from which flows real, human sentiments and emotions. Jesus not only desires to love us intensely, traditionally indicated by flames atop his Heart, but Jesus also gives us definite proofs of his love, traditionally depicted by a crown of thorns circling his Heart and a cross planted in the midst of the flames. We have no problem professing God’s boundless and unconditional love, but I wonder if this profession urges us to accept God’s love for us so completely that we actually become as loving as God, no matter how gradual that transformation occurs.

In an 1889 edition of the magazine, *The Reign of the Sacred Heart in Souls and in Societies*, Dehon wrote, “The reign of the divine Heart in souls must be marked by a renewal of the whole Christian life...We must not imagine devotion to the Sacred Heart as a sort of easy Christianity, toning down the obligations of true Christianity. We must look upon it as a strong and generous devotion which attracts souls by the gentleness of its love, but only in order to make them capable of accomplishing the sacred duties of Christian life and thus to practice the

vigorous virtues which constitute it” [quoted in The Personality of Leo John Dehon, Dorresteijn, SCJ].

For Fr. Dehon, devotion to the Sacred Heart, or we might say, the spirituality of the Heart of Jesus, entails strength, generosity, gentleness of love, and vigorous virtues. If this set of words describes the opposite of an easy Christianity, then we can anticipate some hard and challenging work as we seek to respond to the incarnational love of God for us. Primarily, our embrace of the spirituality of the Heart of Jesus must be incarnational as well. If we profess to love God, we most clearly express it by loving those whom God loves—as God loves them.

This obligation of true Christianity is clearly spelled out in the *SCJ Rule of Life*, particularly the section on communal living [#59-79]. In this section, there are some generalities and some organizational directives, but paragraphs 63-69, under the heading, “Devoted to the communal life,” are extremely challenging. The association with the spirituality of the Heart of Jesus is clear: “We let ourselves be permeated with the love of Christ” [63]. This suggests an abiding awareness of Jesus’ love for humanity, a constant desire to love Jesus in return, and a conscious attempt to love—as Jesus loves—each individual SCJ in the local community and in the Province.

This cannot be undertaken by one person alone. #64 is an eloquent exposition of the community’s role.

“Imperfect, certainly, like all Christians,
we want, however, to set up a milieu
which is favorable to the spiritual progress of each one.
How else to attain this,
if not by deepening in the Lord
even our most ordinary relationships
with each of our brothers?

Charity must be an active hope
for what others can become
with the help of our fraternal support.
The mark of its genuineness
will be the simply way
with which all strive to understand
what each one has at heart.

SCJ Rule of Life # 64

I was surprised to discover that this paragraph does not come from the work of the General Chapter, which was tasked with rewriting the *Constitutions*, but rather is lifted, almost word for word, from Pope Paul VI's, "Apostolic Exhortation on the Renewal of Religious Life" [#39]. It was, however, adopted and integrated into the present Rule.

This description understands a local community to be a **sacred space** "favorable to the spiritual progress" of each SCJ. Further, it defines a local community as the source for **fraternal support** that actively hopes "for what others can become." A **genuine** local community strives "to understand what each one has at heart." When you were assigned to this local community, did you understand that this was part of the assignment?

Most likely, your first thoughts focused on your ministry and then on the practicalities of your living situation: the house, the members who make up the community, the schedule, the quality of the meals, and access to money. And why not? These are the externals that make a local community function.

Yet, when permeated by the love of Christ, you, as members of St. Michael Community, form a sacred space that honors where each one of you is in the experience of your faith and your affiliation with the Congregation. Do you know this about your fellow community members or do you assume that you know? Does this community feel like a sacred space or are you hesitant to share your faith journey—your convictions, your doubts, your delights, your fears, what challenges you, and what affirms you?

The mark of your genuineness as a community is the simple way with which you strive to understand what each one has at heart. At one time I thought that "the simple way" was listening, but this assumes that someone is speaking and sharing what he holds in his heart. We are such complicated individuals that sometimes we don't even know what motivates us, or drives us, or debilitates us.

A not so simple way to understand what is at each other's core is not only to listen, but also to observe respectfully all the non-verbal communication, to ask open-ended questions, to affirm, to challenge, and to listen some more. All this takes time. Are you too busy with many other important things to make the time to understand what your brothers have at heart?

Your fraternal support actively hopes for what your brothers can become. This challenges you to avoid keeping a person frozen in the past. It is extremely easy to size up an individual and

conclude “this is the way he is” which means, “this is the way he will always be.” Common wisdom declares that, “no one really changes that much,” but as a community member, you are tasked with hoping for your brother’s growth and transformation, as incremental as it may be.

An active hope imagines another’s potential and encourages it. This may be particularly important if the individual in question struggles to believe in his own potential because of a negative family history, past failures, or critical feedback that is anything but constructive.

Everyone’s potential, however, is different. My personal best is not your personal best. While it is so easy to want others to be like us, projection is counter-productive. #66 and 67 of the Rule says,

Community life requires
that each one accept others as they are
with their personalities, their duties,
their initiatives, and their limits,
and that each one allows himself
to be called into question by his brothers.

These requirements are the basis of a true dialogue,
in mutual respect, fraternal love,
solidarity, and co-responsibility.

I will not be able to accept another’s questioning of myself if mutual respect is lacking, if I have the sense that my confrere wants me to be someone I am not, if he has not taken the time to understand the responsibilities and challenges attached to my duties, if he does not acknowledge my own creative attempts—successful or not—or if he cannot accept my limits.

In this context, I think the word, “solidarity” means, “do to others as you would have them do to you.” The concept of “co-responsibility” suggests that, “we’re all in this together,” and responses such as, “that’s not my problem” and “let the superior figure it out” are counter-productive.

The Rule of St. Benedict offers an interesting take on “fraternal love,” when it states that “the abbot should love all the monks equally and therefore treat each one differently.” This ancient monastic wisdom reminds us that while it is extremely convenient and efficient to treat everyone in exactly the same way, this approach dismisses any individuality and makes a mockery of the claim to love the individual.

In not only accepting, but also honoring one another's limits, you bear fraternally one another's burdens in one same common life [#8d]. This is what it means to be faithful to Christ's "pressing invitation, *Sint unum*," and how you make your community an authentic center of Gospel life [#63]. The burdens that get in the way of everything are ill-health, frustrating setbacks, misunderstandings among community members, or difficulties with authority figures, all of which Fr. Dehon knew so well from personal experience. They also include the struggle of addiction, of intimacy, of depression, of vocation, or a new consciousness that is not yet understood or supported by the community.

Although C. S. Lewis was not defining a religious community, his words serve as a poetic description of what can happen in a community, saying, "When pain is to be borne, a little courage helps more than knowledge, a little sympathy more than courage, and the least tincture of the love of God more than all."

This is a call to holiness that is connected to daily living; an incarnational holiness that develops through deepening the most ordinary relationships with our brothers [cf. Rule #64], a fellowship that abides "even above and beyond conflicts" [#65], and that is "the fullest realization of Christian life" [#63]. This incarnational holiness, while assuming imperfection [#64] and an entanglement in sin [#22], is a participation in redemptive grace [#22]. St. Paul writes, "Christ died for us while we were yet sinners, and that is God's proof of his love towards us" [Romans 5:8].

The starting point is not perfection, but rather how everyone manages in good faith differences in age, background, education, theological proclivities, pastoral experiences, physical and mental health. And there are those who make their voices heard and those who hold their thoughts [but complain privately], the energetic and the lethargic, those who prefer to reach consensus in decision making, and those who are happy with a simple majority vote, personality clashes, Province politics, contrasting leadership styles, and mid-life crises. With so much tinder for spontaneous combustion, forgiveness must be mutual and freely given.

If you're still with me, you might be thinking, "That's all very nice, but not very realistic. The Rule is inspiring but idealistic. It's not going to happen." I was thinking that myself while I was writing this presentation! It may be true that all this talk about community is just an unattainable dream. I suggest, however, that devotion to the Sacred Heart, or the spirituality of the Heart of Jesus urges us to try anyway. In making the point that followers of Christ are a

new creation, and therefore our former lives have passed away, the apostle Paul tells the Corinthians, “The love of Christ urges us on” [II Corinthians 5:14].

The spirituality of the Heart of Jesus roots us in our daily lives, reminding us that we can love an unseen God only by loving the people right in front of us [cf. I John 4:19-21]. This is the spirituality of the Heart of Jesus, that if adopted, demands strength, generosity, a gentle love, and the practice of vigorous virtues.