



Sacred Heart Devotion Revisited

Pondering the significance for today

From the syndicated column “The Prayerful Heart”

By Julie McCarty

While sorting through some old books recently, I came upon a holy card of the Sacred Heart, given to me forty years ago as a memento of my great-grandmother’s death. The edges are frayed and torn, but I was delighted to see it.

Unlike the typical Sacred Heart pose, this one portrays Jesus as the Good Shepherd, his radiant heart spilling light onto a little lamb at his feet. Jesus’ wounded hands hold back thorn bushes so that the lamb may come close. Their eyes meet in a silent, intent gaze.

Sentimental? Perhaps. But, as a child, this picture helped develop my own sense of personal relationship to Christ. When I saw Jesus, his face flushed with love, caring tenderly for the little lamb, I believed he cared about me as well.

Does Sacred Heart spirituality have a place in the church of today? After the Vatican Council, certain devotional practices were sometimes discouraged, partly because of the reemphasis on celebrating the Eucharist, the very presence of Christ. Commonsense Catholics questioned the theology behind certain practices, such as the Nine First Fridays. Concerns were raised about spiritual approaches that seemed too formulaic, magical, or inaccurate in their portrayal of God.

I wonder, though, what might happen if modern Catholics spent a portion of their prayer time meditating on the deeper meaning behind the message of Sacred Heart spirituality? What if we were to focus our attention on various characteristics of Christ’s love?

Sacred Heart spirituality emphasizes the concern Christ has for sinners. As Pope John Paul II put it, the heart of Christ “particularly reveals the generosity of God toward sinners.” We can see this in the way Christ died for our salvation while we were still sinners, not after we had proved our worth (see Romans 5:6-11). Even in the midst of betrayal, denial, and torture, Christ did not call down fire and brimstone on those who hurt him, but rather forgave them and gave his life for their salvation.

In various homilies, Pope John Paul highlighted the kind, gentle, and peacemaking nature of the Sacred Heart. He reminded us that Jesus said, “Learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart (Matt. 11:29).” Pope John Paul called the heart of Jesus “our peace and reconciliation,” and proclaimed that we, too, are called to reconcile people: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons and daughters of God” (Matt. 5:9).

What would happen if American Catholics decided to take this sort of thing seriously? Christ’s immense love for sinners has the same intensity today—or perhaps more—as when he

walked the earth as Jesus of Nazareth. Meditating on the Sacred Heart means considering the ways I must treat others if I am to be a true follower of Christ.

If we Catholics were truly devoted to the Sacred Heart, would we continue to lash out at each other, as if the church were a war zone? Or would we seek to understand other those who differ on issues of liturgy, morality, spirituality, and social policy? Would our style of conversation and writing be combatant, hostile, and geared at arousing intense fear or anger (like some of the secular media)? Or would we imitate our Lord, who is “gentle and lowly in heart,” listening to others with a genuine desire to understand their points of view?

Focusing our minds on the peacemaking nature of the Sacred Heart, we might feel drawn to get up off the couch, turn off the TV, and reach out to others. Perhaps we would build shelters for the homeless, assist single moms and dads, comfort AIDS victims, or transform systems that exploit the poor and vulnerable. We would encourage civil leaders to stress diplomacy, like the Lord, the One who is “slow to anger and rich in mercy” (Neh. 9:17), especially when dealing with complex local, national, or international conflicts. Perhaps we could research new ways to rehabilitate convicted criminals, or at least meet their spiritual needs, rather than dispose of them like so much rubbish in an electric chair. We might even become a kinder, gentler, more compassionate nation.

But this is dangerous stuff, meditating on the Sacred Heart. Watch out...If you start praying this way, asking God to give you the heart of Jesus, there’s no telling where it will end.



For further reading:

“Holy Father, Sacred Heart: The Wisdom of John Paul II on the Greatest Catholic Devotion,” by Carl Moell (Crossroad, 2004).

“Sacred Heart: Gateway to God,” by Wendy M. Wright (Orbis, 2001).