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Spiritual Health Series

A Spirituality of the Heart

Nicholas Harnan, M.S.C.



AFFIRMATION BOOKS
WHITINSVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS

Spiritual Health Series #7

**A SPIRITUALITY
OF THE HEART**

Rev. Nicholas Harnan, M.S.C.

**AFFIRMATION BOOKS
WHITINSVILLE, MASSACHUSETTS**

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PREFACE

Affirmation Books is happy to present to the general public its *Spiritual Health Series*. This series draws upon the insights of both theology and psychology, and in combining them, arrives at a psychotheological approach. It reflects on the experience of many of the great truths of our Judeo-Christian tradition; it emphasizes the fact that theological truths are essentially intermingled and mutually illuminating.

The first encounter with the term "psychotheological" could evoke the image of some new hybrid science with its own independent subject matter and means of inquiry. However, strictly speaking, psychotheology is not a science but rather an approach to life which draws on secular and religious sources of truth so as to better our response to the total human person as created, redeemed, and called by God in Christ Jesus. This view of the human person is an acknowledgment of the integration of the human and divine which already exists perfectly in Christ and which serves as the inspiring vision, the reassuring reality, the very way to the Father, shared by all Christians on the journey to their own hearts.

It is primarily within the heart of the human person that this integration must begin to take place. The open heart is the only soil in which the Word of God and his grace can take root. God does not work in a vacuum, nor does he say "no" to his own creation. Whatever helps us to find our true hearts and open them to God in experience and in life is good mental health at work. It is also

God at work. The integration of the human and the divine which a psychotheological approach to the human person seeks is what Christ seeks.

There is also an integration between psychology and theology at a secondary level which guides us in our attempts to achieve the primary integration in our hearts. This union occurs at the level of knowledge and insight. It must be emphasized that such an integration does not blur the distinction between nature and grace, between the natural and the supernatural, between psychology and theology. Neither does it deny the palpable presence of God in many people who cannot achieve the primary integration referred to above. If anything, it heightens our appreciation of both sources of truth and prompts us to listen more respectfully to God speaking in them by honoring the noblest traditions of each science. The knowledge and insight gained by a dialogue between these areas of God's truth come from the mutual highlighting of areas of human experience produced in turn by both theology and psychology. Each science in its own way provides an increased awareness, an illumination and unraveling of the human experience, in which God speaks and responds to his precious creation, leading especially to personal growth within a family or community setting.

A psychotheological approach to the problems of human living is a source of nourishment for solutions to these problems. If society is to be healed and the identity of each individual is to be assured, there must be an increased awareness of the need for an integrated development in human

society: that is, a furthering of the physical, mental, social, and spiritual development of the whole person.

It is the hope of Affirmation Books that this *Spiritual Health Series* will challenge the thought and encourage the faith of its readers.

Rev. Thomas A. Kane, Ph.D., D.P.S.
Publisher

About the Author

Reverend Nicholas Harnan, M.S.C., M.A., an Irish Missionary of the Sacred Heart, is a full-time psychotherapist, assistant director, and director of the spirituality program at Heronbrook House, Knowle, England, which is affiliated with the House of Affirmation in the United States. He obtained honors undergraduate and graduate degrees in applied psychology from the National University of Ireland, and a graduate degree in counseling psychology from Anna Maria College. He interned at the House of Affirmation in Whitinsville, and has lectured widely in the United States, South Africa, Ireland, and Great Britain. Father Harnan has published many articles on his special interest: the Christian dimension of human growth and development.

A Spirituality of the Heart

REV. NICHOLAS HARNAN, M.S.C.

This article is the result of a request by some friends to put on paper a few ideas on the psychological aspect of devotion to Christ's Heart. Unfortunately, the comprehensive treatment this subject deserves was not possible. Instead I offer you some personal reflections based primarily on my experience of many people who daily deepen our Christianity by the richness of their humanity. There are also reflections based on readings in psychology, spirituality, and theology. However, as with many such personal reflections they are limited to just one person's understanding of the subject. Despite these limitations they may still help in some way those who wish to move deeper into the heart of their lives and there experience the peace of being human so vividly exemplified in the human life of Christ.

An overview of the subject

In drawing our attention to the Heart of Christ we are drawing our attention not just to the abstract truth that the Word is God, but to the more challenging human experience: "The Word was

made flesh, He lived among us” (John 1:14). The challenge here is to accept that the Love of God was revealed through the *human condition* of Christ. Our only answer to this challenge is to obey the law of our being and accept the human condition where the response to this Love must take place.¹ Natural sciences such as psychology can be used to help us learn more about this human condition adopted by Christ. This same knowledge can also help us to accept more openly the gift of our humanity now sanctified by the presence of Christ. This is indeed the state created for us by God. This is where our response to his invitation to grow into the person he has called us to be must take place, and this at the deepest level possible—in our hearts. In His Human Heart Christ shows us how to love, how to respond to the Father in our experience, how to be divinely human, how to grow as God intends us to grow. The piercing of Christ’s side on the Cross may have been a preordained final gesture pointing us to the source of the vivifying Spirit released from the Heart of One Who, in death, had made for us the ultimate act of obedience to the Father. For this reason we would do well to listen to St. John when he says: “. . . look upon the one whom they have pierced” (John 19:37) and like Christ obey the fundamental law of our creation which will release our spirit from the centre of our humanity—our hearts. Let us now elaborate this summary and where better to start than with the meaning of Heart.

The heart as our centre

The word “heart” is a tantalizing word in that it

has an archetypal appeal which transcends all barriers of language, science, culture, and religion, yet can be used in so many different ways ranging from the sublime to the ridiculous. Therefore it is a primal word which is incapable of being properly defined, but certain properties of the reality to which it is pointing may be indicated and reflected on psychologically. It certainly signifies the person as a whole, bodily and spiritual realities, and resists attempts to dichotomize or departmentalize the human person. It also denotes the centre of the human person, the deepest level of the human person. Here is how Karl Rahner describes it:

“Heart,” taken in this primal sense, denotes that centre which is the origin and kernel of everything else in the human person. It is here that the whole concrete “nature of man, as it is born, blossoms and spends itself in soul, body and spirit . . . is crystallized and set; here it is, as it were, anchored” (H. Conrad-Martius). Here is the focal point of a man’s primal and integral relations with others and above all with God; for God is concerned with the whole man, and in his divine actions it is to man’s centre, his heart, that he addresses his graces or his judgements.²

A journey toward our heart

If we are God’s special creation, “precious in his sight,” it goes without saying that He wishes the best for us and is committed by the Love which brought us into being to have us develop and grow. This growth must involve the whole person, the person actually created by God with His unique design for us imprinted on our hearts. If we are to respond to Him and accept His invitation to grow according to His designs then the

primary religious obligation must be to journey toward the heart of our lives and become “anchored” there. How else are we going to relate to Christ at a deep level? How else are we going to respond to the Heart of Christ except by first finding our own hearts? How else are we going to relate to the Father except in Christ?

Growing towards this divinely ordained “anchorage” is never an easy matter. I think it would be universally acknowledged that most of us are finding this growth difficult and that it is the work of a life time. It must also be acknowledged that some of us have a lot of growing to do and may be growing at a very slow pace. This implies that the avoidance of growth must somehow be perceived by many of us as being easier, less risky, more desirable, despite the impoverishing consequences of lack of growth. So why is it a struggle to grow and reach the heart of our lives? A theologian would rightly point to original sin. A psychologist would tend to ask: What do we fear?

A fear of the real self

In very general terms psychology would suggest that the human being is very afraid of being unloved and unlovable. It would also seem to suggest that every individual is searching for some kind of self-value no matter how misguided his or her efforts may sometimes be in seeking to establish this self-worth. Through our history and early formation we may have been exposed a little too much to what might be termed “conditional” love, that is, loved not for ourselves but for the conformity we mustered for those who tried to shape our lives. In

such an atmosphere we can learn that certain experiences of ourselves, certain parts of ourselves, are bad and unacceptable. All this can generate pervasive fear of losing favour, of being devalued in some way or even rejected by significant people in our lives. This can bring into operation our psychological defences to such a degree that we distrust ourselves, distrust others, and consequently distrust God in certain unavoidable human experiences. By such overuse of defence mechanisms we unconsciously resort to various forms of denial, repression, distortion, and rationalization in an effort *to shut off deeper but threatening levels of our humanity*. The sad result is often a very poor sense of self, a shallow emotional life, a too great reliance on our intellectual capacities in order to eke out a self-value from a feverish investment in life's activities. In this way we seek to provide ourselves with a heart of our own making but untrue to the design God intended for us and unreceptive to a deep planting of real truth, real love, and the real God in our lives. Here is how one psychological writer describes it:

All of us use defences; they are essential for our psychological survival. But the greater the range, frequency and intensity of defences, the more difficult it becomes to get in touch with the reality of ourselves and to alter in it an authentic and appropriate development. If our life is dominated by these defences, we are far away from our true self and therefore from the capacity to accept and love ourselves and let others love us. A good deal of Christ's public ministry involved challenging the defences of those around Him, a process which was essential for asserting the truth, but which was inevitably leading to His

death, as His audience had severe limits as to how much of true life and love they could face.³

A spirituality of the heart

These reflections might be considered as an appeal to cultivate what the present writer considers to be a spirituality of the heart. It involves trying to generate a trust in the goodness of God's creation within us so that we have the courage to lessen our defences, return to the service of our real hearts, and continue the growth into the self God has designed for us. To do this we might have to reclaim areas of ourselves that have been rejected, and gently bring them into the light of truth. It might also be a profitable exercise to examine the design of the self we are following at this moment. Is it an unloving and uncaring imposition of someone else's design which makes our lives less fruitful and open, which makes us too anxious for the approval of others? Areas of excessive shame and guilt must somehow be submitted to the healing influence of truth even if it means reaching for professional help. Sometimes the source of our shame and guilt is simply the fact that we are human and have certain human needs and feelings. Above all we must learn that we have all the worth and significance we need *within us*. This value comes from the fact that we are God's precious creation. It lies at the centre of our lives waiting to be declared and actualized in a positive response to God in our experience. All this value lying at the heart of our lives awaits the Truth which will pierce through unnecessary defences

and which will allow our spirit to emerge in a joyful celebration of our existence. The truth in question is simply that *God loves us*. How are we going to let this truth through to our hearts?

Opening our hearts to the truth

The first step in this direction is to try to become more *present* to ourselves, to our experience, to others, and consequently to God. This can only happen if we slow down, get off the merry-go-round of feverish activity, whether mental or physical, and develop a reflective and listening style of living. By gently reflecting on our lives at present, our history and experience, we may eventually *discern* the true story of our life, a life filled with acts of quiet heroism, genuine attempts to do our best, a greater understanding of our faults and limitations, a fuller appreciation of the obstacles with which we had to contend. In short, a story which delights our Heavenly Father because He is already telling us this story in our hearts. The good morale engendered by this good news will surely inspire us to reduce our defensiveness, to celebrate our value and worth in still further acts of heroism and provide us with the courage to surrender to His design unfolding in the truth of our daily experience. However, this reflection and listening if it is to be truly infused with God's caring, must be gentle and positive. Unfortunately, too many of our attempts at reviewing our lives are harsh, negative, and unjustly condemnatory. This is simply unhealthy introspection. In this reflection let us single out certain factors which open our hearts to the Truth.

Self-acceptance

To open ourselves to a fuller acceptance of the real self we must first examine, and if necessary modify, the design or self-concept which could be crippling us, and then try to become more aware of the sacredness of our uniqueness and originality. In some cases, the modifying of this unrealistic self-concept may need some form of counselling or psychotherapy. Nevertheless, we must all try in our various ways, especially in a wholesome involvement in the spirit of the Sacrament of Reconciliation and where possible in sound spiritual direction, to modify the harshness of demoralizing self-concepts. We must foster ideals which inspire us, heal us, and lift up our hearts. To foster such ideals we must try to discover and celebrate the good news contained in the truth that each of us is unique and original.

Originality has everything to do with our unique history, heritage, and way of being in the world. Even the traces of the wounds inflicted by this history can become (like the wounds of the Risen Christ) a testimony to our uniqueness and originality. If we could only realize that it is as much in our fragilities and limitations as in our strengths and gifts that our beauty and uniqueness lie, then the idea of a God loving us would become more convincing. It is in the precise configuration of our pluses and minuses, our strengths and weaknesses, our gifts and limitations, and their integration into our lives by a humble acceptance that we become more present to that heart originally designed for us by God. One has only to look at a

great painting with its unique integration of colours and shades of light and darkness to become conscious of its indescribable presence and spiritual quality of originality. Or even consider a simple flower with its trusting acceptance of its uniqueness and fragility and we will understand how its divine beauty drew admiration not just from poets and artists but from Christ Himself. How much greater is our potential to express the beauty of our divine originality in a human existence so ennobled by the presence of Christ.

A deepening of our emotional life

As mentioned previously in this essay one defence mechanism which is sometimes overused in our lives is repression of feelings. There are many reasons why this can happen. First of all our culture tends to reward us for hiding our feelings, for being stoical, controlled, and rational. Second, our religious education excelled in the training of the intellect and will, the noblest faculties of the soul. Third, all our education, especially in our early home life, reflected many of the above cultural and religious values. The emphasis was on *control* of our feelings rather than on their *integration* into our total life experience. Too little time may have been spent on helping us to learn *how* to feel, how to cope with the sometimes baffling experience of anger, sexuality, the pain of loss and separation. There is not enough space here to go into a detailed explanation as to how this can come about. But as I said previously, it is possible that many of us may have picked up a sense of disapproval associated with certain feelings (especially of anger and sexuality) and this deeply

buried sense of disapproval could give rise to feelings of unexplained guilt, fears of rejection or feelings of being worthless. Once our *feeling* presence in the world becomes inhibited and under threat then we are nudged in the direction of such defence mechanisms as rationalizing and intellectualizing our experience. Put more simply, we are forced to live more in our "heads" and less in our hearts.

Living in our heads

Trying to live in our heads soon impoverishes the quality of our lives. Our presence to both our internal and external worlds is not purely intellectual in spite of some people's admiration for the hyperrational individual. We have the bodily presence also which involves a whole series of feeling responses. Trying to live in our heads therefore means trying to be half present (or half absent) to our reality. It means simply that we are only half living. Our deeper self mourns this impoverishment and tries to express it in various ways. Apart from clinically diagnosed emotional and mental suffering there are other forms of suffering contained in certain kinds of depression, anxieties, loneliness, periods of darkness, which are in reality a calling us back to our deeper selves, our hearts, where God is speaking more clearly in His total and precious creation.⁴ A misunderstanding of this painful dissatisfaction with ourselves can affect other people's lives in that we become impatient with them, with the world in general, with our lot in life, and a cynicism can develop which implicitly proclaims a disillusionment with the

whole human adventure. Peace and a sense of being worthwhile can only be restored by a *reconciliation* with our total human condition, by a docility to the voice of God speaking in our hearts and in every moment of our daily experience, whether joyful or painful. Reconciliation, if it is to be authentic in a Christian sense, must first have an acceptance of the *human condition* through which God revealed His love for us in Christ. Then it must have an acceptance of our own human condition as the means specially chosen by God to enable us to *experience* His love in our hearts. For this we have the word of St. Paul when he says that “. . . the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit . . .” (Romans 5:5).

Letting God love us with our human hearts

To grow to appreciate our true value and sacredness is to grow in the experience of God's love in our hearts. Everything which happened in our history has a vital bearing on the revealing of this love for us. Our history is the story of God in our spirit “groaning” to emerge from our hearts. The Spirit of God emerges in that right order which is established between God and His Creation. For this order to be established between us and our Creator we must return to the “anchorage” where God awaits us, to the design He has laid down for us. By entering fully into the heart of our creation we are moving nearer to that design. This is how Christ saved us, by immersing Himself in the heart of our humanity, by saying yes to the Father in every movement of His Heart up to His final yes

in death. It was from such a Heart, pierced by the Truth of God's right order, that the Spirit of God was released on the world. it is only in such a Spirit that we can say *Abba*, Father, and experience it in the depths of our hearts.

All our struggles and pain are the result of our spirit seeking to emerge. The piercing of our hearts by the Truth of God will release this spirit. By living in His Truth we are being faithful to the condition He created for us. To experience the Love of God for us we must be open to that self God wishes us to become by being open to His providential intervention in every moment of our history and lives. For this to be responded to openly and truthfully we must begin growing in the sense of our own sacredness and value, because this is how we make way for the experience of God loving us with our human hearts. Only then are we in a position to let God love others with our hearts. So whenever we are tempted to reject the fullness of our human condition or the human condition of others and thereby disobey the fundamental law of our creation, let us return to the Heart of Christ and "look upon Him whom they have pierced" (John 19:37). Finally, may the prayer of St. Paul be answered in our lives:

Out of his infinite glory, may he give you the power through his Spirit for your hidden self to grow strong, so that Christ may live in your hearts through faith, and then, planted in love and built on love, you will with all the saints have strength to grasp the breadth and the length, the height and the depth: until knowing the love of Christ which is beyond all knowledge, you are filled with the utter fullness of God (Ephesians 3:16-19).

Notes

1. Johannes B. Metz, *Poverty of Spirit* (New York: Paulist Press, 1968), p. 6.
2. Karl Rahner, S.J., "Some Theses on the Theology of the Devotion" in *Heart of the Saviour*, ed. Josef Stierli, S.J. (New York: Herder and Herder, 1958), p. 133.
3. J. Dominian and A. H. Peacocke, *From Cosmos to Love* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1976), pp. 56-57.
4. Anna Polcino, S.C.M.M., M.D., *Loneliness*, Spiritual Health Series (Whitinsville, Mass., U.S.A.: Affirmation Books, 1979), pp. 14-15.

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