

“A Whole and Happy Heart”
Fr. John Bayer, O. Cist.
Sunday, October 29, 2017
Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Christ the King (10/28), Abbey (10/29)
Ex 22:20-26; Ps 18; 1 Thes 1:5-10; Mt 22:34-40

The Command to Love

Christ commands us to love. This is a mysterious or thought-provoking affirmation in the Gospel: love, which can only be given freely, is obliged by divine law. We cannot love under compulsion; and yet we are compelled to love. It must be the case that God’s law presses upon us at a deeper level than anything else: that his law does not run against our freedom to override it or drag it unwillingly into a new direction. God’s law does not compete with our freedom, for it is the very Word that calls our freedom into existence. In other words, when we love, or when we follow the law of God, we are at the same time choosing to align with the deepest desires of our own hearts, which are given to us by the one who creates us and gives us to ourselves. To obey God is to obey the author of our hearts; it is therefore also to obey ourselves in our most authentic desires. God commands us to do what we most truly desire to do, because what we were created to desire is love.

We must not simply love. We must love with “all” we are: heart, soul and mind. What does that look like? To speak about “all” a heart, or a “whole” heart, is to speak about a “pure” heart. In the dictionary, definitions of the word “pure” include being free from anything that is different, inferior or extraneous; it is to be unmodified by mixture; simple or homogeneous; clear and free from blemishes; straightforward, unaffected. When we love wholly or purely, we are not divided by complicated and contradicting loves. Rather, we are integrated; we love in a harmonious and unified way.

Pure Love

What, concretely, does pure love look like? Children can give us an image of it (maybe a funnier but inferior image is the single-mindedness of a dog with its eye on its bone, frantically sprinting and slipping in place as he is held by a leash on a linoleum floor). Often, when I spend time with younger children, I am struck by how simple their wills are. Generally, each child wants only one thing in a given moment. It may switch course from one moment to the next; nevertheless, children have a one-track mind/heart. This child wants to play this game. And she gives you the impression that she wants to play it now and forever – again and again. My father loves to remind my siblings and me that when we were children he would wrestle and play with us – and that after each round we would chant the refrain, “Do it again, Daddy!” When a child is captivated, he wants only one thing. He does not want a different game; he does not want a drink; he does not want a bathroom break; he does not want to clean his room. He wants to play the game. There is something so attractive about this simplicity.

Admittedly, children want what they want with insistence. This is a strength and weakness. Their inability to relativize their will can also be destructive. It certainly makes it difficult to reason

with them at times. But there is nevertheless something wise about the simplicity of the undivided will enjoyed by a child.

Things become complicated as we grow older and become able to nuance and control our wills, or at least their concrete expressions. On the one hand, this too is a strength. Our willing can become integrated into broader horizons: we can distinguish between our passing desires and our deeper desires; between our bad desires and our good desires; we can integrate our desires and the desires of others. But on the other hand, this ability to nuance, control and order our wills makes us capable of willing one thing while pretending to will another; and of being one way while appearing to be another.

Children have no such duplicity. They are whole and pure. They give us an image of what it is like to will with “all” our heart, soul and mind. Imagine a world in which we all wanted to love God and neighbor with the integrity and simplicity that a child enjoys when he wills to play his favorite game.

The rewards of this love are immense: “Blessed are the pure of heart, for they will see God” (Mt 5:8). With a pure heart, that is, with an undivided love, we will see God. When we learn to love God alone as absolute, and so learn to release our grip on things and allow them to be “relativized” and find their place within the great harmony of the whole – that is, if we refuse to turn anything into an idol – then God and his wisdom will be as obvious as daylight. This is Jesus’ promise: we will know as certainly as we know anything that God is; that the force behind all things is kind; that he is present; and that every minute of our lives is in his gentle and unimaginably dexterous hands. Is there a greater gift? What happiness would be out of reach if we were truly rooted in such a vision?

The Mill¹ of the Heart

How do we cultivate such a pure heart? In the monastic tradition, purity of heart is a big theme. Many authors wrestled with the duplicity that can be found in our hearts, minds and souls: our conflicting wills, thoughts and impulses. The more we pay attention to our interior life, the more we become aware of just how complicated we can be. Disturbing thoughts and images enter in to adulterate others more pleasing and peaceful. We see that our desires to do the good are often mixed with selfish desires seeking our own advantage. Our pre-conscious impulses and reflexes, and our habits whether we are awake or asleep, can sometimes offer us surprising revelations about our sub-conscious depths.

What do our mixed hearts, minds and souls mean? How do we heal and integrate them for purity and the vision of God? One influential monastic author from the fifth century, John Cassian, had this to say:

“It is, indeed, impossible for the mind not to be troubled by thoughts, but accepting them or rejecting them is possible for everyone who makes an effort. It is true that their origin does not in every respect depend on us, but it is equally true that their refusal or acceptance does depend on us. [...] [I]t is, I say, largely up to us whether the character of our thoughts improves and whether either holy and spiritual thoughts or earthly and carnal ones increase in our hearts. Therefore we practice the frequent reading of and constant meditation on Scripture, so that we may be open to a spiritual

¹ There are a few great videos to understand what a mill is and so learn to appreciate this image: [George Washington’s Gristmill](#) on YouTube. About millstones, see [this video](#) from about the fifth to eighth minutes.

point of view. For this reason we frequently chant the psalms, so that we may continually grow in compunction. For this reason we are diligent in vigils, fasting, and praying, so that the mind which has been stretched to its limits may not taste earthly things but contemplate heavenly ones.”²

A desire for purity determines the kinds of activities we freely engage in. Monastic disciplines are medicines for the heart, mind and soul meant to restore our unity and integrity. These disciplines – and so many others – are obviously not the privileged possession of monks and nuns. So let us ask ourselves: What do we play, watch, read and converse about? What do we choose to listen to on the radio, or daydream about as we fall asleep? What images do we hang on our walls? What movies and TV shows do we watch? What public figures do “follow” in social media? With what do we choose to fill ourselves?

We cannot stop our hearts. The heart is an eternally moving thing. It is like a mill, Cassian says. What changes is not its movement, but rather what it grinds in its millstone and offers up for our nourishment.

“This activity of the heart is not inappropriately compared to millstones, which the swift rush of the waters turns with a violent revolving motion. As long as the waters’ force keeps them spinning they are utterly incapable of stopping their work, but it is in the power of the one who supervises to decide whether to grind wheat or barley or darnel. Indeed, only that will be ground which has been accepted by the person entrusted with the responsibility for the work.”³

There are various sources for the grain that enters us. “Above all we should know what the three sources of our thoughts are: They come from God, from the devil, and from ourselves.”⁴ I think we all understand this. That is, we know we can shape our hearts, minds and souls by choosing wisely to mill the right grain. We can learn to delight in some things over others. And our true happiness depends upon whether we have the will to put God’s grain in our mills. As we struggle to sacrifice vulgar, vain and worldly grains, we can be consoled by the knowledge that it becomes easier. The flour produced by good grain is truly more delicious and wholesome, and our tastes will adapt to its goodness.

Only One Thing is Necessary: Martha and Mary

But things are ultimately not as simple as sacrificing what is obviously not nourishing our interior life. Even good things can get in the way of purity of heart. Ultimately, the one will that unites us is our personal response to God. In other words, we are not called to dump mindlessly into our minds every good book, movie, image and activity we can find. As good mill workers – that is, as good custodians of our hearts – we are called to discern the concrete will of God, which has a personal dimension.

There are, therefore, always two dimensions to pursuing purity of heart: first, listening for God; and second, obeying him when he tells us to do something. The first is unifying and restive; the second can be very diverse and active. The two are not equal. First comes contemplation: the open, docile, patient but expectant attitude, where we come to know God and allow ourselves to be taught by him. Then comes action: the strong, unwavering, obedience where we carry out what he commands us in prayer and – here is the catch – *surrender* every other good thing that we could

² First Conference, XVII.1 in *The Conferences in Ancient Christian Writers* (Newman Press, 1997), 56-57.

³ First Conference, XVIII.1 in *The Conferences in Ancient Christian Writers* (Newman Press, 1997), 57.

⁴ First Conference, XIX.1 in *The Conferences in Ancient Christian Writers* (Newman Press, 1997), 57.

have otherwise done. No one of us can do it all. We must surrender so many good works! If we refuse to do so, then we are not following the will of God. He does not ask each one of us to do everything we can imagine. We are only members of the Body of his Son, in whom alone all gifts and merits are found.

We must have the humility to surrender our own plans for our lives. We must surrender our abstract, self-help programs and learn that true goodness begins in a concrete, contemplative and discerning dialogue with God. Everything else is secondary. Everything else is important and necessary, but still secondary.⁵ When Cassian comments on the story about Mary and Martha, he says contemplation is primary, not because action is unimportant, but because good action springs from and leads to contemplation.

“You see, then, that the Lord considered the chief good to reside in *theoria* alone – that is, in divine contemplation. Hence we take the view that the other virtues, although we consider them necessary and useful and good, are to be accounted secondary because they are all practiced for the purpose of obtaining this one thing. For when the Lord said: ‘You are concerned and troubled about many things, but few things are necessary, or even one,’ he placed the highest good not in carrying out some work, however praiseworthy, but in the truly simple and unified contemplation of him...”⁶

It is better to neglect one good work in order to do the other that God actually asks us to do than to perform thousands with the frantic, self-absorbed anxiety of an activist.⁷ To find purity, we must also integrate our desires for good things. Good things too can scatter and divide, unless they are integrated into a single will. We must seek only one thing, and we will enjoy purity of heart and the vision of God. That one thing is God’s will. We must learn how he asks each one of us to love concretely and we will discover what it means to love purely. This means that the single will which integrates our heart, mind and soul is ultimately not our own. It is the divine will in us, which we choose freely to obey. In this way, our own search for purity not only integrates us interiorly, giving us the peace of a harmonious heart, mind and soul. It also integrates us among each other, for we are all together following a single will.

And one day, we will all together play a single game with unimaginable delight – chanting “Do it again, Daddy!” to our heavenly Father for all eternity.

⁵ Cassian on spiritual disciplines: “these are exercised for the sake of cleansing the heart and chastising the flesh only in the present” (X.I, 48, cf. 44-48). Works of piety and mercy, “are necessary in this age, as long as inequity continues to dominate. Their practice would not be called for even here were there not an overwhelming number of poor, need, and sick people, which is the result of the wickedness of men who have seized for their own use – but not used – those things that were bestowed upon all by the Creator of all.” (X.4, 49).

⁶ First Conference, VIII.1 in *The Conferences in Ancient Christian Writers* (Newman Press, 1997), 47.

⁷ Cassian says, “it is preferable to be without the member of one commandment – that is, without one work and its fruit – and to be healthy and solid in the other members and to enter the kingdom of heaven crippled, than with all the commandments to trip against some stumbling block that through pernicious habit would separate us from our habitual rigor and from the discipline of the orientation that we have chosen and embraced.” (XX.6, 61).