

Stumbling into the Three Moments

• • •

The favors of the LORD are not exhausted,
his mercies are not spent;
They are renewed each morning,
so great is his faithfulness.

—Lamentations 3:22–23

I had never paid attention to images of the Heart of Jesus before I joined the Society of Jesus (Jesuits). Even though I grew up in a solid Catholic family and went to Catholic schools all my life, the Sacred Heart never penetrated my dense little consciousness. But soon after I joined the Jesuits at the age of twenty-three, I read a book by Fr. Pedro Arrupe, an earlier superior general who played a major role in reforming and updating the Jesuit Order after the Second Vatican Council.

Fr. Arrupe helped our order to get in sync with the times. But Fr. Arrupe was also critical of the times, believing that Catholics as a whole and Jesuits in particular had lost touch with what might be called a *devotional imagination*. He reminded us that devotion to the Heart of Christ—that is, devotion to the love God shows us in the flesh of his Son whose loving Heart was pierced on the Cross—should remain the center of our lives. It is Christ's Heart that speaks of God's will for us. God's

love, demonstrated in the flesh by Jesus, is the source of our hope. Arrupe even went so far as to say that the renewal of the devotion to the Sacred Heart would be a sign of the renewal of the Society of Jesus. As a brand-new Jesuit, I took note of this, though honestly I didn't really know what it meant and what it would soon come to mean in my own life.

Only a few months later, in bleak midwinter, I was sent by my novice master to Pine Ridge, South Dakota. This was not a vacation. I had accepted a mission to teach students at Red Cloud Indian School, which is a work of our mission on the reservation there. I was also commissioned to drive the school bus in the afternoons and do odd jobs around the place.

Now, any teacher will tell you that coming to a school in the middle of the year is difficult under the best of circumstances. However, I had taught high school for two years, and so I thought I would probably be successful in the classroom here. I was mistaken.

Because of the cultural and religious differences between the Native American students and their mostly white teachers, many students did not trust their teachers. This was especially true of me, the newcomer. Every day after I had finished teaching and driving the afternoon bus, I would come back to the community chapel and just sit there. I thought I was praying, but in reality I was just talking to myself about my woes.

I was being beaten in the classroom day in and day out. What I eagerly wanted to give them, these Lakota teenagers did not want. They had grown up on the reservation with a suspicion of white people in general and of priests and religious in particular. Many associated Christianity with the forces of colonialism that had oppressed them and left them bereft of their culture and their way of life. This made sense. But it also

put up barriers. The students and I were both carrying a lot of historical baggage.

At first I was angry with the kids: *What's their problem? How can they be so disrespectful and ungrateful?* Then I would be angry with their parents for not raising them right. Soon, however, I turned that angry judging of others onto myself. I had much to accuse myself of. The problem wasn't so much with the students but with the teacher. *If you knew what you were doing in there, I said to myself, you would be able to handle the classroom. You thought you were a successful teacher already, but it's clear now that you're a fraud. If you weren't so lazy and ill prepared, you might be able to come up with a lesson plan that would work!*

Encountering the Sacred Heart

Obviously, my afternoons in the chapel judging the kids and their parents and then berating myself made for some pretty messy prayer times. But then one day as I sat in the chapel, I noticed a statue outside the door to the hallway, just beyond the tabernacle. For some reason this little painted plaster image drew my attention.

It was my first personal encounter with the Sacred Heart. Jesus was standing there with his Heart opened up, vulnerable, on the outside of his body. The Heart was pierced and bloody, and the plaster itself was dinged up quite a bit. I noticed his hands, too; one pointed to his heart, the other beckoned to me. There he stood, looking at me with such intense love; it was as if he was speaking directly to me, saying, "This is the way I live. This is the way I love. Truly, this is the only way to love. You can do it. You must do it. There is no other way."

As I looked at the statue, what drew me in was the pierced Heart. That's how my heart felt. Mine was getting pierced in smaller ways than Jesus' Heart but in very real ways nonetheless. I had given myself to this religious vocation. And now I wanted to share what had been happening in my heart with kids who I knew desperately needed to hear some good news, and yet they wanted none of it. Not only was I proving to be a lame teacher but also that perhaps my whole vocation was for nothing. As they rejected me every day, my students were in a small but real way piercing my heart. I could see Jesus' Heart had been pierced long before mine, but maybe his Heart was continuing to be pierced right along with mine. I suddenly saw that I was not alone.

More important, I began to situate this whole context into a larger framework. The piercings my students had undergone in their own lives were far greater than anything I was feeling. I started to see all of this—my own suffering, the suffering of those around me, and the suffering found in the whole of human history—as marked by wounds of various degrees and kinds. And now I was beginning to see all of it in light of the pierced Heart of Christ.

But that Heart was more than just pierced. I also saw the fire emerging out of it. Even though the piercings are real, continuous wounds, they do not destroy his Heart. He could take the piercings, all the way to death, even, and still live. And it wasn't a matter of taking the pain in some heroic, stoic, tough-guy way. I could see in a new way that Jesus had a way of transforming these sufferings into fire, into life, and into love. The piercings and the fire of that Heart had started to sink into my imagination, and I began to see with the eyes of my own heart how the piercings and the fire go together. They are not contradictory. In

fact, the power and brightness of the fire is made possible only by the piercings.

If I try to avoid piercing, I might be able to for a while, but then the fire will go out. I can build up barriers around my heart to make sure I don't get disappointed or hurt. I can become cynical and bitter and not get my hopes up to avoid the hurt of disappointment. I can numb my heart as our culture encourages us through entertainment, distraction, pornography, drug and alcohol abuse, workaholicism—you name it. I can try any number of ways to numb or protect my heart, to build a barrier around it, and in every case the fire will go out. What I'd have on my hands then would be a hardened and lifeless heart, not good for much at all. I might be walking around, but I'd be dead inside.

Once I began to see the Sacred Heart in this way, it became clear to me that this was all I needed. I saw, and still see, that this is all there is. This is the whole of reality. The point of our lives is love. There is no love without piercings along the way, but the piercings will not do us in. I will be wounded along the way living this life, living this vocation, but I can remain on fire. There is a fire that will not be quenched if I keep my heart open, if I resist the temptations to shut down, to defend, and to hide. This is Jesus. His whole mission has always been to open up the Heart of God to the world and not flinch in doing so.

I would later come across a U2 song that spoke to this reality. In "When I Look at the World," Bono sings in a kind of dialogue with Jesus, or maybe better, a wondering soliloquy directed at Jesus. He sings of imagining the world through Jesus' eyes.

People find all kinds of things that bring them to
their knees. . . .

So I try to be like you, try to feel it like you do,
but without you it's no use. . . .

Can't wait . . . to see what you see when I look at
the world.¹

The Christian imagination and Christian prayer in daily life must start, I believe, with this sense of wonder at Jesus—who he is and how he lives and loves. What has God done, letting go of his power, of his transcendence to become small and vulnerable, first as a baby in the womb of a young woman? What has he done, to be born into a stable and laid in a manger that animals eat out of, and then to end his life on earth in humiliation and defeat on a cross, executed between two common criminals? What has God done? This isn't how God is supposed to act!

And if this is God, then who am I? What does it mean to live authentically? As a follower of Jesus, how am I following his example of love? By keeping my gaze on Jesus, I start to see my own daily interactions with people a bit differently. To do this, I need to pray in a way that will keep me in constant dialogue, prayerfully mindful of seeing the events of my life through the lens of the Heart of Jesus.

Can I live like that? Can I love like that? Pausing a few times during the day to ask those questions and to cultivate a vision based on the Heart of Jesus, is the goal.

Finding Our True Selves in the Sacred Heart

At a conference dedicated to the history and theology of devotion to the Sacred Heart in 1981, then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger presented a paper on the foundations of the devotion to the

Heart of Jesus.² The future pope observed that devotion to the Sacred Heart is not simply one devotion among many. Rather, devotion to the Sacred Heart is *the* Christian devotion. The Sacred Heart of Jesus reveals the whole Christian mystery. In the words of Pope Benedict XVI: “The Christian God has a heart of flesh.”

When I look at the image of the Sacred Heart, I see at once the image of God who has assumed a heart of flesh (Incarnation) that is wounded and bloodied (paschal mystery) and at the same time aflame with an unquenchable fire of love (Resurrection). And if this Heart signifies who Christ is, then it also points to who I am called to be. I can find my true self in living according to this vision.

My daily prayer, then, should lead me to live in this way: opened to the world, vulnerable, and simultaneously pierced and burning with love. If I can do this, I need never lose hope, for I will have accomplished God’s ultimate vision, the purpose for which I was created.

So, how can I pray in such a way that disposes me to become more and more like this—united to the Heart of Christ?

Rediscover the Daily Prayer of the Heart

Over time, some Jesuit friends and I adopted a method of prayer that we later discovered had been established long before we took up the practice. This approach involves offering my heart and my life to God at three separate “moments” of each day.

At the beginning of the day, I say to Jesus, “I want to live this day, and all that’s in it, not in isolation but with you. I want to offer what’s in my heart to what’s in your Heart.”

At the end of the day, I take another moment to look back and see how it's gone. This prayer, or Examen, is based on one of the ways of praying taught by St. Ignatius of Loyola in his *Spiritual Exercises*. This is a simple act of using memory to pay attention to what actually happened in the day. Little by little, I developed a habit of speaking to Jesus about all that is ordinary in my life. As I continued this daily practice of engaging in brief exchanges every morning and evening, it began to change how I looked at the world.

The third "moment" covers the spiritual reality of the whole day. We might think of this moment as a continuation of the celebration of the Eucharist, the source and summit of our lives. Whether or not we attended Mass on a particular day, the ordinariness of everyday life is best understood in light of this "moment" of prayer in which the whole Church engages all over the world, every day. Although you and I cannot be physically present at every moment and in every place this prayer is being offered, we are a part of this mystery. What goes on in the Eucharist gives me a framework for understanding and making choices in daily life that will lead me out of isolation and into relationship, into dialogue, and into friendship with God.

This "three moments" approach to prayer is not about "punching the clock" with God; we are not God's employees. We are his children. And so, we offer our lives to God, day by day, in the same way that Jesus offered his life and days to the Father. This is a way of praying and seeing the world that starts to make our daily lives much more intimate, as places of genuine encounter with God. Our day-to-day living, seen from within this way of praying, becomes a matter of one heart being offered to another. What sparked this discovery for me was

the “discovery” of what I came to realize was called the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

In the chapters that follow, we will examine each of these moments in turn, so that you can begin to integrate them in your own life. For easy reference, you will find “The Three Moments: A Concise Guide” on page 137 to help you cultivate these daily prayer habits.

As you start praying like this, little by little, you will get in the habit of speaking to Jesus about all that is ordinary in your life. Then you’ll begin to realize that by speaking about it to him, things are starting to change—or you are changing. Everything is changing. Things might not have gotten fixed the way you asked or expected, but they did get fixed. These brief exchanges of speaking and listening during the day will change the landscape of your life. This prayer practice can change how you see the world.

An Invitation

Most of us feel far from God at times. Oftentimes, we attribute this distance to our busyness or our self-sufficiency; we are too busy to pray or don’t feel we need God. Other times, it is guilt or shame that separates us, our fear of what God thinks of us, or our presumption that God has better things to do than to get wrapped up in the little things of our lives.

At times we may feel as if there is a great and widening chasm between God and us and that the prospect of trying to cross that gap is overwhelming. As we read in *Gaudium et spes*, “Through Christ and in Christ, the riddles of sorrow and death grow meaningful. Apart from His Gospel, they overwhelm us.”³

So then, how can we span the great gulf between God and ourselves? Can we pray ourselves across it? That sounds like a very tough job, requiring lots of discipline and incredible focus. Don't be afraid. Start by making an offering, and then watch what happens.

Daily Offering Prayer of St. Thérèse of Lisieux Member of the Apostleship of Prayer

Oh my God! I offer You all my actions of this day for the intentions and for the glory of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. I desire to sanctify every beat of my heart, my every thought, my simplest works, by uniting them to His infinite merits; and I wish to make reparation for my sins by casting them in the furnace of His merciful love.

Oh my God! I ask of You for myself and for those dear to me the grace to fulfill perfectly Your holy will, to accept for love of You the joys and sorrows of this passing life, so that we may one day be united together in heaven for all eternity. Amen.

Questions and Reflections

1. At what moments do you feel far from God?
2. Do you have any ideas why?
3. How do you talk to yourself in ways that block you from God?
4. Recall and savor a genuine heart-to-heart conversation with God.

5. What do you think Jesus would say to you now from his Heart?
6. What does your heart long to tell Jesus at this moment? Tell him.

PART I

The Morning Offering

...

A Morning Offering

Jesus,

I offer you my day and all that is in it—all the prayers, works, joys, and sufferings I might experience today—in union with your own Heart that is loved by the Father and opened up to the world, even if it gets pierced. I offer you every moment of the day in union also with the intentions of the Holy Father, all the bishops around the world, and all other apostles of prayer, as well as with all those who are suffering today, for the salvation of the world. Amen.

The Morning Offering

• • •

Though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.

—Philippians 2:6–8

If we want to get closer to God, we must speak with him frequently in prayer. Okay, fine. But how exactly do we do that? What if we don't feel up to the task?

Actually, we aren't up to that task. Admitting that fact is a good place to start. No one of us is worthy, no one deserves an audience with the holy, all-powerful Creator of the universe. And yet, over and over again God reaches out to us. St. Paul wrote that, when we don't have the right words to pray, the Spirit prays within us (see Rom 8:26–27). St. Irenaeus said that the Word of God was “made flesh” so that we might unite ourselves with immortality.⁴

This is the reason why the Word of God was made flesh . . . so that we might enter into communion with the Word of God, and by receiving adoption might become sons of God. Indeed we should not be able to share in immortality without a close union with the Immortal.⁵

Something new happened in human history after God became a person. When the Father sent the Son to take on human flesh, God made himself part of our human story. Now, it's for us in daily prayer, throughout the three moments of each day, to recognize how we are part of God's story.

What I suggest in this chapter is a way of praying that is not a big secret. It doesn't require flawless discipline, specialized technique, or prerequisite holiness. It's a way of praying at the beginning of the day that simply offers to God everything that makes up our ordinary lives. He's already become a part of the human story. The Morning Offering prayer is a way for us to consciously insert our ordinary day into God's hands and make it a part of God's story.

Getting Started

Many Catholics who grew up in previous generations have told me that one of the main prayers they learned as children, after the Our Father and the Hail Mary, was the Morning Offering of the Apostleship of Prayer. One man I know, a retired university administrator, recently told me that he started posting the Morning Offering on his bathroom window in the 1940s, as a student at a Jesuit school, and has been praying it every morning since. I think there are many such prayers scrawled on slips of paper and stuck onto windows and mirrors and nooks and crannies in the homes of older Catholics. I think it would be a great help to lots of younger people to take up that same practice.

I grew up without knowing about this practice. Once in a while, if I was complaining about something, my mom might annoy me by saying, "Offer it up." That was as close as I came to the Morning Offering—or the Apostleship of Prayer that

promotes this way of praying—until I joined the Jesuits. Since I've started doing it, though, it's made a great difference in my life. It helps dispose me to make everything I do each day an expression of prayer. It helps me align my will with God's. It syncs my heart with the Heart of Christ, helping me to see others as he sees them and to live among others motivated by God's love. (Maybe Mom knew what she was talking about!)

I'm not saying the Morning Offering is a spiritual panacea. It doesn't make everything work out perfectly in my daily life. I get distracted. I forget about the offering I made at the beginning of the day as things start to get complicated. But at least I began my day right. I made the offering today. And again another day. And day by day, little by little, that practice has come to shape my imagination and the way I begin to see my life, the lives of other people, and the world around me. At the very least, the Morning Offering is a good starting point that gives me purpose and direction even if I lose it along the way in my busy day.

There are dozens of offering prayers out there. Here's the version I pray:

O Jesus, through the Immaculate Heart of Mary,
I offer you my prayers, works, joys, and sufferings
of this day
in union with the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
throughout the world.
I offer them for all the intentions of your Sacred
Heart:
the salvation of souls, reparation for sin, and the
reunion of all Christians.
I offer them for the intentions of our bishops and
of all apostles of prayer,

and in particular for those recommended by our
Holy Father this month.
Amen.

Notice that the “reach” of this Morning Offering is not a laundry list of petitions; rather, after addressing Jesus directly and invoking the friendship of his mother, the prayer goes right to its main thrust: “I offer *you* . . .” Speaking to Jesus, I am offering him my day—all of it—the good, the bad, and the ugly. What can seem like a whole litany of duties that I have to take care of on my own now becomes a joint effort. Not just the spiritual, “churchy” things that I do but all of it—the prayers *and* the works, the joys *and* the sufferings—becomes part of one coherent expression of who I am.

Jesus wants to be a part of it all. He wants to live the *whole day* with me, not just what I think he ought to be interested in or approving of. My whole day then has the potential to become something undertaken, in dialogue, in friendship with the Lord who has already joined his life to mine. To make this joint effort truly personal, it’s essential to speak from the heart and let Jesus unite his Heart to mine in all that I do.

A Family Offering

I encountered a variation on the Morning Offering a couple of years ago when I found out that my sister had initiated an evening ritual in her house with her two kids. They called it “prayers, works, joys, and sufferings.” I think they learned it from another family in their parish. My sister and her kids aren’t super religious, but this is something that they all started to

appreciate. (Of course, the kids bellyached about it at first, but after a while they'd complain if they missed it one night.)

Toward the end of dinner, everyone would go around the table and say what the prayers and works were of the day—who they wanted to pray for and something they worked hard on, usually at school. Then they'd cover the joys and the sufferings too. It took only a few minutes, but it was obviously a good exercise for them all, if for nothing else, just to remember what went on in the day. This breaks the rut. But also, they were sharing their lives together and, maybe even somewhat unconsciously, sharing it with God. I don't think they even considered themselves to be praying, but they were giving an opening to the Lord, letting him in on the regular stuff of their lives, precisely by sharing it in the context of their evening meal. My sister also liked it because she could get little insights into what was going on in her kids' lives. She learned things that she might not have been aware of and thereby knew where to pay extra attention in caring for them in the near future.

Speaking these moments of a day out loud (and together) is a great foundation for cultivating a spirituality of the Morning Offering and evening review (Examen) that we will discuss later. It disposes us to being able to recognize God in daily life. St. Thérèse of Lisieux, who was herself a card-carrying member of the Apostleship of Prayer, called this “the Little Way”—finding union with God in the little things. She was able to do that, in part, because she disposed herself to it every morning when she made her offering.