

Carmelites and the Sacred Heart

Johan Bergström-Allen, T.O.C.



Exponents of Carmelite spirituality tell us that ‘the Carmelite tradition begins in searching hearts’ (John Welch, O.Carm., *The Carmelite Tradition*), and they speak of the relationship between Carmelites and Jesus Christ as *Seasons of the Heart*. The dynamic at the root of the Carmelite quest is a longing for God deep in the heart. The Carmelite journey is a pilgrimage to the heart of God whom we eventually discover has been dwelling deep within our own hearts all the time.

It is therefore not surprising that Carmelites have often given prominent place to the notion of ‘the heart’, including the Sacred Heart of Jesus, one of the most widespread devotions of Catholic Christianity, propagated by Pope Pius XII’s 1956 encyclical on the Sacred Heart *Haurietis Aquas*.

Today most people associate devotion to the Sacred Heart with Saint John Eudes (1601-80) and Saint Margaret Mary Alacoque (1647-90), a nun of the Order of the Visitation at Paray-le-Monial in France. She was inspired to encourage love of Jesus’ Sacred Heart through devotions that became common in many Catholic homes: Holy Hours, receiving holy communion on the first Friday of every month, and enshrining images of Christ’s heart. Particularly associated with the devotion are acts of consecration and reparation. Following Margaret Mary’s promotion the feast of the Sacred Heart was instituted on the Friday after the octave of the feast of Corpus Christi.

The feast of the Sacred Heart

Although Margaret Mary made devotion to the Sacred Heart widespread, the idea actually predates her by many centuries. Whether or not you believe that she experienced a vision of Christ asking her to promote devotion to his heart (and Catholics are not required to believe it), the devotion is a beautiful and fruitful one which has its roots in the Scriptures.

This becomes clear in the texts of the Eucharist celebrated on the feast of the Sacred Heart. The feast is essentially a restatement of the events of Good Friday, that day when Jesus showed that he loves us so much he would even die for us. The Gospel of the feast comes from the account of Saint John (19:31-35):

Since it was the day of Preparation, the Jews did not want the bodies left on the cross during the sabbath, especially because that sabbath was a day of great solemnity. So they asked Pilate to have the legs of the crucified men broken and the bodies removed. Then the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and of the other who had been crucified with him. But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out. He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth.

This Gospel passage reminds us that pondering the heart of Jesus was something done by the apostles and the early church. From the earliest centuries John the Evangelist's eye-witness account of the blood and water flowing from the heart of Jesus has been interpreted as a symbol of the Eucharist (blood) and baptism (water). These sacraments of initiation also echo the symbolism of the Church issuing from the side of Jesus, just as Eve – according to one of the accounts of creation in Genesis – came from Adam's side.

John tells us that at the crucifixion he personally witnessed the heart of his teacher and friend being pierced. To understand why this was so significant to John we have to think back to the previous occasion when the Evangelist was close to the heart of Jesus. According to John's own account (13:23) he was reclining next to Jesus at the Last Supper. In many works of art John is shown leaning on Jesus' breast. If John was reclining next to his master he would have been able to hear Jesus' heartbeat.

In a moment of great tenderness and intimacy, John rested against the heart of Jesus. At the crucifixion John saw that heart being pierced. After the resurrection 'the disciple Jesus loved' would have been drawn – like doubting Thomas – to touch the side that had been pierced. At Jesus' ascension that heart was taken into heaven, and now within the Trinity a human heart is beating.

The idea of hearing the heartbeat of God was very important to medieval saints who nurtured devotion to the Sacred Heart. Women such as Saint Mechtilde (d. 1298) and Saint Gertrude (d. 1302) perceived Jesus' heart as the breast of a mother. Just as a mother gives milk to nourish her child, so Jesus in the Eucharist gives us his life blood.

Carmelite devotion to God's human heart

According to our *Rule of Saint Albert* we Carmelites live *in allegiance to Jesus Christ* (Ch. 2). We realise that Jesus, true God and true man, is the revelation – the true image – of God the Father, and that we can only come to know the Father through the humanity of Jesus. Saint Teresa of Jesus (of Avila) spoke of the *Sacred Humanity* of Christ, and urged her sisters to meditate on the human life of Jesus. She tells us in the description of the fourth dwelling place in *The Interior Castle* that she was misadvised by certain books on prayer that meditating on the humanity of Christ was a hindrance to higher forms of prayer. Teresa came to realise instead that the human person was *the way* which God had chosen to reach out to God's people and that therefore nothing truly human was inappropriate to God.

Devotion to the Sacred Heart is therefore especially appropriate for the Carmelite, because it encourages us to reflect on Jesus in his humanity. In the years following Teresa's reform of the Order, her sisters in France further developed devotion to the Sacred Heart, notably Venerable Mother Madeleine of Saint-Joseph (1578-1637), Blessed Marie of the Incarnation

(Madame Acarie, 1566-1618), and her daughter the Venerable Marguerite of the Blessed Sacrament (1619-48).

To these, and later Carmelites, the word 'heart' awakens an image of that vital organ which throbs within us. We know that it sustains our physical existence, but we also speak of the heart as that place deep within that gives rise to our emotions and desires. We talk about *giving our heart* to someone or something, we speak of *opening our heart* to others, and we are afraid of having a *broken heart*.

We know from John's account of the Gospel that Jesus' heart was broken, but devotion to the Sacred Heart is not only about Christ's anatomy but rather about the emotions and feelings he has for us: tenderness, forgiveness, and love.

Touching the heart of God in the Scriptures

Carmelites are required by the *Rule of Saint Albert* to *meditate on the law of the Lord day and night* (Ch. 10), and this means taking up the Scriptures every day. The first hermits on Mount Carmel would have recited and learned *by heart* whole passages of the Bible, particularly the Psalms. In the *Psalms* we encounter the full range of emotions that the human heart is capable of. The Psalmist declares: 'I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation' (13:5), 'I will praise the Lord who counsels me; even at night my heart instructs me' (16:7).

It is clear for Carmelites that our hearts are to be places where the Bible takes root, since 'the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, should dwell abundantly in your mouth and in your hearts' (Ch. 19).

Turning then to the Bible we discover that the word *heart* occurs over seven hundred times, and it is worth looking at a few instances of this. If we come to know the Scriptures we will encounter the heart of the living God and be able to declare – like the disciples on the road to Emmaus – 'were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?' (*Luke 24:32*).

The first book of the Bible, *Genesis*, tells us of how men and women were made in the image and likeness of God but that our sinful hearts turned from the Creator: 'The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The Lord was grieved... and his heart was filled with pain' (6:5-6). Just as sin distorts our hearts away from God, so it fills God's heart with sadness.

The pain God felt in his heart at humanity's waywardness was not simply the hurt of anger but the anguish of a loving parent: 'Oh that their hearts would be inclined to fear me and keep all my commands always, so that it might go well with them and their children forever!' (*Deuteronomy 5:29*).

The Bible reminds us that giving our hearts to God alone is the only true way to be fulfilled, as summarised in the great Jewish commandment known as the *Shema*: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts.' (*Deuteronomy 6:5-6*). This phrase is echoed in the Carmelite *Rule of Saint Albert* (Ch. 19).

In our commitment to loving God it is so easy to be half-hearted: 'But you hearts must be fully committed to the Lord our God, to live by his decrees and obey his commands' (*1 Kings 8:61*).

The Old Testament reminds us that men and women's first fault is disobedient pride – putting ourselves in the place of God – and that our hearts must be melted. The Lord warns us: 'your heart will become proud... circumcise your hearts therefore and do not be stiff-necked any longer' (*Deuteronomy* 8:14, 10:16). God's ways are not impenetrable to us; rather, the will and the word of God are imprinted on our hearts: 'the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it' (*Deuteronomy* 30:14).

God is always reaching out to our hearts, but it is so easy for us to turn away without listening for God's gentle whisper. As the *Psalmist* cries: 'O that today you would listen to his voice! Do not harden your hearts' (95:7-8).

In a world where our hearts are injured and hardened by failed relationships, it can be difficult to trust in the loving heart of God. However, God can transform our situation: 'A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.' (*Ezekiel* 36:26).

The Bible also reminds us that 'Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart' (*1 Samuel* 16:7). There is no point in trying to deceive God since 'the Lord searches every heart and understands every motive behind the thoughts' (*1 Chronicles* 28:9).

The compiler of *Proverbs* has wisdom in his heart: 'Above all else guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life' (4:23)... 'A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones' (17:22).

Elijah: zealous for the heart of God

The story of the Old Testament prophet Elijah occurs in the *Books of the Kings*, and has always been an inspiration to Carmelites. The mission of Elijah was to bring the people of Israel back to the Lord by turning their hearts from false idols. During Elijah's great contest with the prophets of the false god Baal on Mount Carmel he declared: 'Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so these people will know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again' (*1 Kings* 18:37).

According to the 1995 *Constitutions of the Carmelite Order*, 'From Elijah Carmelites learn to be people of the desert with heart undivided, standing before God and entirely dedicated to his service' (Part 1:26).

Another of the Old Testament books of the Bible that has had profound influence on Carmelite spirituality is the *Song of Songs*, a love-poem straight from the heart which particularly inspired Saint John of the Cross. His poem *The Dark Night* speaks of the guide that 'burned in my heart', which clearly echoes the *Song of Songs*: 'All night long on my bed I looked for the one my heart loves; I looked for him but did not find him' (3:1). We may feel in our hearts a hunger for God, but Carmelites appreciate that God's love for us is even stronger and that in Jesus we see revealed the heart of a God whose love seeks requiring.

Jesus speaks in the Scriptures about the human heart

Of course the most important Scriptural figure for Carmelites is Jesus himself, and he had plenty to say about the human heart. The coming of Jesus was heralded by his cousin, John the Baptist, whose mission – like Elijah – was to call the people back wholeheartedly to God: 'he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord' (*Luke* 1:17).

In his sermon on the mount Jesus said that the pure in heart are blessed for they will see God (*Matthew 5:8*). Jesus advised his followers to learn from him, 'for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls' (*Matthew 11:29*).

Jesus' authority from God is confirmed by the fact that he can read people's hearts. In Mark's account of the Good News, Christ is able to perceive the hard hearts of the scribes (2:8) and declares 'Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: "These people honour me with their lips but their hearts are far from me" (7:6).

Having a human heart himself, Jesus is able to resonate with our experience and have compassion. In Luke's Gospel, when he encounters a widow mourning the death of her only son, 'his heart went out to her' (7:13). Similarly Jesus felt compassion in his heart when he encountered the five thousand 'because they were like sheep without a shepherd' (*Mark 6:34*).

Jesus came to tell the world that we are deeply loved by God from the heart. Our response to this free gift of God's love should be a heart entirely set on God. But Jesus knew that despite our best efforts we often latch on false gods that do not satisfy us. Jesus told us to fix our hearts not on material things but on a relationship with our Creator, 'For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also' (*Luke 12:34*).

Jesus understands our weakness, our fears, and our broken-heartedness because he too knew the anguish that can lie deep in the heart. In the Garden of Gethsemane he declared 'Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say?' (*John 12:27*). Yet by being open to the will and love of his Father, Jesus was able to comfort the hearts of his followers: 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God.' (*John 14:1*).

Mary: woman of pure heart

No one trusted in God more than Mary, mother of Jesus. According to Saint Luke's account of the Gospel, Mary was a woman with a reflective heart attuned to God: 'Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart' (2:19, 51). Like Jesus, Mary experienced an anguished heart ('and a sword will pierce your soul', *Luke 2:35*), but she trusted always in God.

In the Carmelite tradition we revere Mary as the *woman of pure heart*, a title ascribed to her since the Middle Ages. Like her we are meant to cultivate detachment so that we enjoy purity of heart (*puritas cordis*), given over to the one true God and not distracted by false idols. With her we strive to serve Jesus 'faithfully from a pure heart and a good conscience' (*Rule of Saint Albert*, Ch. 2).

When speaking of purity of heart it would be wrong to limit our vision to an obsession with the Jewish-style 'purity laws' which exclude so many people from a relationship with God and which Jesus had little time for. Instead it is helpful to bear in mind the words of the Carmelite scholar Chris O'Donnell. He points out that purity is important only in so much as it enables other things. For example, a jug that holds milk needs to be clean so that the milk is not contaminated. A jug that is clean and pure but empty is of little use to anyone. The reason for the jug is to dispense milk, and in order to do this properly it must be clean. Thus we cultivate purity of heart not so that our hearts are clean yet empty; rather we need pure hearts so that they can be fit to overflow with love. By imitating Mary, 'the Virgin of a new heart' (*1995 Constitutions*, Part 1:27), Carmelites learn to make space for God (*vacare Deo*) in their lives.

Another biblical episode that has constantly inspired Carmelites – and which can inform our thinking about the heart – is the description of the early Christian community in Jerusalem that we find in *The Acts of the Apostles*. In that community the first followers of Jesus pray for discernment from God who knows everyone's heart (1:24), and 'all the believers were one in heart and mind' (4:32).

These early Christians exchanged letters with one another, and many of these contain encouraging references to the human heart. For example, Paul prayed for the Thessalonians that God would 'strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy' (*1 Thessalonians* 3:13) and John declared 'dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God' (*1 John* 3:21).

A confident heart

The great Carmelite Saint Thérèse of Lisieux certainly shared John's confidence before God, not because of her own efforts in loving Jesus but because she was certain that Jesus loved her. In 1895 she wrote a poem *To the Sacred Heart*:

A heart I need, to soothe me and to bless,
A strong support that cannot pass away,
To love me wholly, e'en my feebleness,
And never leave me through the night or day.
There is not one created thing below,
Can love me truly, and can never die.
God become man – none else my needs can know;
He, He alone, can understand my cry.

Such confidence in the capacity of God's heart for even her feebleness emboldened Thérèse to discern her vocation to be 'love in the heart of the Church' (*Manuscript B, Letter to Sr. Marie du Sacre Coeur*, p. 254).

In recent years other Carmelite nuns have placed their confidence in the heart of Jesus that loves us even in our feebleness. Congregations have been founded within the Carmelite Family that take their name from devotion to the Sacred Heart, such as the Carmelite Sisters of the Most Sacred Heart, and the Carmelite Sisters of the Divine Heart of Jesus. By forming praying communities at the service of God's people, such Carmelites cultivate hearts open to those around them. Professing the evangelical counsels of obedience, poverty, and chastity contributes to their purification of the heart (*RIVC*, Part 1:8).

Getting to 'the heart' of what matters

The Carmelite insight into the place of the human heart in God's plans for the world is centuries old. One of the most influential documents of Carmelite spirituality, *The Ten Books* (which incorporates the better-known portion called *The Book of the First Monks*), was written by a Carmelite friar, Felip Ribot, about the year 1385. Early in the text it is stated that:

The goal of this life is twofold. One part we acquire by our own effort and the exercise of the virtues, assisted by divine grace. This is to offer God a pure and holy heart, free from all stain of sin... The other goal of this life is granted to us as the free gift of God, namely, to taste somewhat in the heart and to experience in the mind the power of the divine presence and the sweetness of heavenly glory, not only after death but already in this mortal life. (Book 1, Chapter 2).

In Ribot's understanding, the human heart is a place for a relationship of cooperation with God.

The heart: an interior space

Carmelite devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus has encouraged us to reflect on the image of our own hearts. In the Carmelite tradition the human heart is a space where the great realities of life become interiorised.

One example of this is the way that we use the image of the desert. According to the *Ratio* formation document of the O.Carm. friars, Carmelites are people who know the desert but a desert that is 'a place of the heart' (*RIVC*, Part 2:27). According to the *Rule for the Third Order of Carmel* the desert experience is an obligatory aspect of Carmelite life: 'Carmelites must travel along this road, in the desert of interior mortification. This is so that they may listen to the Lord who speaks to their heart in new and surprising ways' (*RTOC* 48).

Carmelites likewise regard the 'cell' spoken of in Albert's *Rule* as no longer simply a physical space, but a state of the heart: 'The cell is not merely an external structure; we must build it at the heart of our inner selves: therein dwells God, who invites us to enter and seek the One who is.' (*RIVC* Part 2:30).

In our cells – however we construct them in our hearts – we Carmelites are to 'meditate day and night on the law of the Lord and keep vigil in prayer'. Such prayer takes us into the heart of God, or as the Carmelite Saint Mary Magdalene de'Pazzi put it, prayer 'penetrates to the very core of the Word in the Father's heart' (*I Colloqui*, 50, 922). Her contemporary, John of Saint-Samson, said that 'in prayer, the loving heart reaches out towards God and rests in him' (*Le vrai esprit du Carmel*, 122, 1), a sentiment echoed by Saint Thérèse (*Manuscript C*, 25r).

The Carmelite experience of entering in the heart of Jesus is not a refuge from the concerns of the world. Rather, by entering into the heart of Jesus in prayer we come to experience the love that God has not only for ourselves but also for others. Thus 'areas where Carmelites are found will all receive from them some warmth from their contemplative hearts which can see the image of God in others' (*RTOC* 44). The act of engaging ourselves in the world which God loves also allows us to enter more deeply into his heart: As we allow ourselves to be challenged by the poor and by the oppressed we are gradually transformed and we begin to see the world with God's eyes and to love the world with his heart (cf. *1995 Constitutions*, Part 1:15).

Our experience of the Sacred Heart therefore makes demands of us: 'we must create a climate of silence and of conversion capable of opening hearts, eyes and minds, so that enlightened by the Word of God we may learn to read the signs of the times, listen to others and be attentive to what is happening in the world and in the environment in which we live' (*RIVC*, Part 2:45).

The Scapular: a gift from the heart

I conclude with a small observation regarding the Scapular, the symbol of salvation which has been entrusted to the Carmelite Family.

In 1910 Pope Saint Pius X allowed the wearing of the traditional cloth scapular to be replaced with a scapular medal. He stipulated that on one side should be an image of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, and that on the other should be an image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

I think that this symbolism is not coincidental. Wearing the Scapular medal against my heart, I am constantly reminded that – like Saint John the Evangelist – my heart beats alongside that of Jesus Christ.