

Fifth Sunday of Lent



“I will put my law within them and I will write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they shall be my people.” (Jeremiah 31: 33b)

God’s law of love is in our hearts. It is at the heart of all of God’s covenants. It guides and directs all our decisions and actions. It further unites us to the love of Jesus for the Father and the love of Father and Son for the Spirit.



Theophane the Recluse said, “To pray is to descend with the mind into the heart, and there, to stand before the face of the Lord, ever-present, all-seeing, within you.” (*The Art of Prayer, an Orthodox Anthology*) Yes, the heart, in the spiritual sense, is the locus of God’s loving presence within us. It’s the place where we can sense our life beating on, every moment of every day and the place where we come to God in prayer, even if, at times, this can be challenging, given the many distractions and thoughts that race through our minds on a regular basis. Perhaps that’s why, another desert Father, John Carpathios says, “It takes great effort and struggle in prayer to

reach that state of mind which is free from all disturbance; it is a heaven within the heart, the place as the Apostle assures us, where Christ dwells in us, (2 Cor 13:5)” (pg 39, *The way of the Heart: the spirituality of the desert fathers and mothers*, Henri Nouwen)

That state of mind can only come when we're not distracted, when we're at one with God, and are ready to be totally honest with God about our hopes and dreams, our desires and disappointments, our struggles and our failures. That state of mind can only come when we allow God to speak to us in the silence of our hearts and are willing to open ourselves up to whatever God may ask of us. It enables us to unmask any illusions about ourselves too, and prompts us to be confident in God's mercy, despite our sinfulness.

Furthermore, that experience of heaven within our heart, to which John Carpathios refers, can more readily come about, if we allow God's law of love to be translated into concrete actions on behalf of the poor, the marginalized, the disadvantaged, the abandoned, and those judged unworthy, by some, of God's love, care, and concern. Indeed, we look to our heart in guiding our actions because of God's law being placed therein, as we heard in our first reading from the Prophet Jeremiah in which God declares, ***“I will put my law within them and I will write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they shall be my people.”*** (Jer 3:14)

With this in mind, this year's *Share Love, Share Lent* campaign by Development and Peace on Solidarity Sunday invites us to reach out in love to our global community, especially to those affected by this viral pandemic, in countries where resources are scarce and economic support is minimal or non-existent. Inspired by Pope Francis' encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, this year's

Development and Peace campaign strives to make the vision of the Pope ---of a world in which we all recognize our common brotherhood and sisterhood as part of one family and look out for one another as family members do--- a reality.

He bases this assertion on Gospel love. He writes, “Our love for others, for who they are, moves us to seek the best for their lives. Only by cultivating this way of relating to one another will we make possible a social friendship that excludes no one and a fraternity that is open to all.” (FT 94) He later reflects on the ramifications of such love by asserting, “If every human being possesses an inalienable dignity, if all people are my brothers and sisters, and if the world truly belongs to everyone, then it matters little whether my neighbor was born in my country or elsewhere.” (FT 125)

Part of that realization further entails that we cultivate an abiding respect for the different cultures of people in different countries and a willingness to enter into what Pope Francis refers to as “a cultural covenant” with them. ----A way of relating to one another which respects our differences, while also offering “opportunities for advancement and social integration to all.” That means, that sometimes, we may be asked to give up some things ---some goods that we have--- so that our brother or sister who is suffering may gain a greater dignity of life from the blessings we share with them. The pope asserts that such a renunciation on our part is made possible, by love alone. (FT 221)

To cultivate such love, we need to turn inward ---to our heart--- and find God there!

And once we find God there, we can allow that divine presence to transform our perspectives, our attitudes, the consciousness of our vocation, and our connectedness with one another through prayer.

A great book to read to connect our prayer to the heart is Henri Nouwen's *Prayer of the Heart, the Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers*. In the 3rd part of the book, Nouwen gives three suggestions to develop a greater ability to pray with-and-from the heart. The first step is to learn to pray short, simple prayers. Too many words often pose the danger of making our prayer stay in the mind and not descend to our heart. He suggests we take a cue from children when they pray. They typically pray from their heart because they don't have a large vocabulary and aren't self-conscious of others judging them for what they're saying or doing. As adults, we can emulate this childlike directness to God, by perhaps focussing only on a single word or a simple sentence.

When I was in initial formation for the Precious Blood and was living in Kansas City, the Director of Formation recommended to the 7 candidates there, that when a word or verse of the Divine Office struck one of us, that we should let it soak in and allow the others to continue with the Office because the Holy Spirit had already given the candidate what he needed for that day, with that one word! And it's true! Such a practice helps us to concentrate more intently on the meaning of the word or sentence and creates an inner stillness whereby we can hear the voice of God more clearly. This is the same idea that we find in Taize prayer! We sing a short phrase until it becomes meditative and heartfelt. And it happens for different people at different times. At

another point in my life, toward the end of my seminary formation, when I was living at the Precious Blood House of Studies in Rome, our morning prayer would start with a beautiful sung phrase from the Divine Office. (Signore, apri le mie labbra, e la mia boca proclami la tua lode.) Translated: Lord, open my lips and my mouth with proclaim your praise. It was a beautiful way to set the tone for the day!

Connected to this first way of developing our praying with the heart is the second way recommended by Nouwen: praying without ceasing ---making every thought, word and action a living prayer throughout the day. To achieve this, he recommends that we repeat a simple phrase or scriptural verse over and over until it becomes an ordinary part of our everyday consciousness. This technique was first written about in the book, *The way of a Pilgrim*, by an anonymous author who chose the prayer, "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me." Called the Jesus prayer, the pilgrim prayed it over a thousand times a day and allowed that prayer to pass from his lips into his heart until it became an unceasing prayer. Once in his heart, the prayer enabled him to discern how to be a servant of God's mercy to the people whom he met along his travels.

The third way of increasing our prayer from the heart that Nouwen recommends is by refraining from restricting our concerns, only to those things that we think, are acceptable to God. Instead, we need to bring to the Lord the good and the bad, the pretty and the ugly, the achievements and the failures, all our preoccupations and weaknesses and all the prayer requests we've received from other people as well. Nothing should be out of bounds. By allowing all of ourselves to be exposed to God's grace all of the time, God can then heal what needs to be healed, strengthen what needs to be strengthened, and rejoice with us in our successes. When we do this, we discover that our closeness to God grows in the process! Our love of the Lord grows stronger and

more sure! Our confidence in God's grace increases! And our ability to love our brothers and sisters throughout the world knows no bounds! So let us pray simply, without ceasing, about everything that's happening in us and around us! And in this way, we'll truly bring joy to Christ and one another at Easter!

(Confirmation Candidates, message us "Come and live in my heart, Lord!")