

Loving Hearts and Replacement Parts

The ancients put a lot of stock in the human heart. Search the Scriptures, and you'll find the heart described as the seat of the intellect, the conscience, the emotions, the passions and the will. It's a lot of work, but some organ had to do it.

Besides, the sages usually assigned the complex workings of romantic love to the liver. That division of labor kept the heart free, no doubt, to worry over such urgent matters as wisdom, heaven and geometry.

Nowadays, of course, we know that the heart is merely a muscle that pumps blood to keep the machine running. When the pump slows, leaks or flutters, we can call in a surgeon to tune it up. Many of my close friends—and now my father-in-law, too—have endured such a tune-up in the last few years. I know the procedure by now: the doctors take a length of artery from the leg, then break the patient's ribs and fit the leg artery portion as a bypass for the heart's clogged plumbing.

All of this cracking and tearing hurts a body for some time afterward. My father-in-law wondered aloud if he would always feel as lousy as he felt the week after his surgery—and if so, how was it worth the trouble?

But the pain does seem to bring about a gain. A few months later Grandpa—trim, exercised and full of vigor—said he

hadn't felt so good since he was a teenager. In his case and many others of which I've known, the patients—men and women of ample wisdom going into surgery—seem to have grown wiser through the ordeal. So maybe the ancients were on to something after all.

The suffering of heart surgery is remedial, something people endure so that they can continue to enjoy life. They consent to the surgery only when they're convinced of a threat to the heart, sometimes a threat that's discernible only to the most sensitive of medical gadgetry.

Far more painful than cardiac rehab is the suffering of a broken heart (according to the modern literary sense of the organ). In the midst of family quarrels, sibling rivalries and generational differences, we wonder indeed whether we'll feel this way the rest of our lives and why God allows us to suffer.

Yet this suffering, too, should be remedial. The lesson of the crucifix is that even the cruelest and most humiliating heart-break can save not only one's own soul but the world as well. For those who suffer with Christ are not content to be mere victims of a sacrifice but priests as well. They actively make the offering of their lives, and they begin by getting their interior lives in order. Suffering has led many a soul to self-knowledge, which in turn leads to penance, which is the one remedy we all need.

Then true healing has begun, from the inside out. "A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise" (Psalm 51:17).

Say That Again

Some decades ago I lived in a parish that was just beginning a new program for Sunday visits to sick parishioners. Since I lived a block away from the rectory and Terri and I had no children at the time, I got “volunteered” for just about everything, and this program was no exception.

It was no great trouble, really. I was probably the parishioner best equipped to handle Pennsylvania weather. I drove a tank of a car, a powder blue 1970 Dodge Coronet with a 440 engine. Winter could do little to hinder me as I rolled along the back roads. Nor need I hesitate at the nearly vertical hills I encountered en route to the hospital.

I learned, however, to be open to surprises of a different order.

Once I visited the hospital room of a man who had suffered a stroke. He was an usher in our parish, so I knew him in passing. He apologized for not remembering me, but after the stroke, he explained, he didn't remember anyone, including his wife, his son and his daughter. Still, he could speak and listen with little difficulty. His family, he said, was slowly reintroducing him through photos from his years of marriage.

I had the task of reintroducing him to Jesus Christ. And I have to confess, I didn't feel up to it. It had been a long day; his room was my last stop; I was exhausted.

I began by reading him the gospel of the day. I don't remem-

ber the passage, but it was one that you and I have heard a thousand times in our adult lives. I was reciting it for the umpteenth time that day, and I was probably thinking about going home to my wife and my dinner.

Abruptly the man stopped me by placing his hand on my book. "Wait a minute," he said. "Say that again."

I repeated the phrase I had just read.

"That's amazing," he said. "That's amazing." I saw he had tears in his eyes. It struck me then that this man was hearing the gospel for the first time. And he was bowled over by its good news.

On my drive home I asked our Lord to restore the newness of the gospel to my heart and mind. What that man gained from circumstance I wanted to have by grace.

That's been my prayer ever since, through many changes in my life. Having children only confirmed the need for me. If we want our sons and daughters to sense the excitement of faith, if we want them to know the adventure at the heart of all great literature, if we want them to experience wonder at the intricacies of creation as they pursue their studies in the sciences, if we want them to feel the joy of friendship with Jesus, then we have to communicate the *newness* of life in Christ, even many years after our baptism or conversion. We have to radiate the newness of the gospel even decades after we have heard it for the hundredth time.

Paradoxically, we sustain our love by growing older in close company with the object of our love. This is true of marriage, and it's true of our life of faith. We need to spend time in the company of our beloved, in conversation and in the quiet too. No matter what the old proverbs say, no heart will grow fonder through absence from Jesus Christ.

We mustn't wait for a medical condition to restore the newness of love to our spiritual life. We may not get the particular grace that that old man received in his hospital room. And the gospel is eternal anyway, so it never grows old. But we have to cultivate its newness in our own lives through sustained and disciplined prayer and study.

God will give us the grace, but what we do with it is our business. He leaves us free to accept or reject his love, and we make that choice every day, building on the choice we made the day before.

Moments of illumination arrive maybe once in a thousand hospital visits. But our growth in love is a matter of the will's corresponding to God's grace, exercised day after day after day after day.

Your Priesthood

Do you think your son will be a priest?"

My son Michael, now a teenager, is a good kid, and often enough we hear the question. If God wants Michael to be ordained, I pray that he'll respond faithfully. But even if God calls him another way—say, to marriage—I hope Michael grows up with a full appreciation of his holy priesthood.

"You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood," wrote Saint Peter, the first pope, to the churches of the East (1 Peter 2:9). He was not writing merely to his clergy but to people like you and me. Pope John Paul II echoed those words in his 1988 Apostolic Exhortation on the Laity, *Christifideles Laici*.

The priesthood of the laity "has never been forgotten in the living tradition of the Church," the Holy Father wrote.¹ True, but we Catholics have treaded cautiously in this area since Martin Luther's distortions of four centuries ago. Luther claimed the priesthood of all believers as a justification for dismantling the sacramental priesthood.

But it's not. The priesthood of the laity is a necessary complement to the priesthood of the clergy. When someone asked Cardinal Newman why laypeople should matter, he replied that the clergy would look pretty silly without them.

If we're to understand our priesthood, we first have to ask, what is a priest? A quick answer is that a priest is one who offers sacrifice. Indeed, Saint Peter's letter directs its readers "to

be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:5).

We know when our parish priest offers his principal sacrifice: in the Mass. But when do we offer ours?

“Incorporated in Jesus Christ,” said Pope John Paul II, “the baptized are united to him and to his sacrifice in the offering they make of themselves and their daily activities. . . . ‘For their work, prayers and apostolic endeavors, their ordinary married and family life, their daily labor, their mental and physical relaxation, if carried out in the Spirit, and even the hardships of life if patiently borne—all of these become spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.’”²

This is an important realization for us who are living the Christian vocation to family life; who daily sacrifice our time so that we can do honest work well; who give up our best hours in order to raise our children, comfort our friends and care for our ailing parents. For those are our spiritual sacrifices. And we mustn’t underestimate their value. The Second Vatican Council declared: “During the celebration of the Eucharist, these sacrifices are most lovingly offered to the Father along with the Lord’s body. Thus, as worshipers whose every deed is holy, the laity consecrate the world itself to God.”³

That’s a powerful notion: that our everyday works, joys and aggravations are our own priestly participation in the Mass. Reading these passages should change the way we look upon Mass and in turn should change the way we live. What is the quality of the gifts we place on the altar? To what degree can I truthfully call myself a worshiper “whose every deed is holy”?

Our priesthood should call us to a deep examination of conscience. For when we sin—when we gossip, vent anger or detract from another’s reputation—we are abusing our priest-

hood; we are placing unseemly gifts on the altar with the Body of the Lord.

We wouldn't stand idly by while our parish priests made such an offering. We should hold our own priesthood to the same high standard.