

Convent 2016

Entering the Temple of the Heart

I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known, in order that the love you have for me, may be in them, and that I myself may be in them. John 17: 26

We are being called by Archbishop Justin to create a wave of prayer between now and the feast of Pentecost. Prayer is, or should be, the basis of our Christian life, the source of our experience of Jesus as the Risen Lord. St. Paul, urges the Christians of first century Thessalonica to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17)

If the heart is the most authentic temple of God, the truest dwelling place of God, then it is also our true home. It is the deepest and most authentic part of our humanity, the place of wholeness and integration. "All things are there," St. Macarius says of the heart. The heart is not only the physical, but also the psychic and spiritual centre of the human person. It is the point of convergence, and also union of body, soul, and spirit. It is the means through which we enter into communion with God and experience grace.

At the centre of the purified heart there is only One. This One is, no doubt, the subject of Meister Eckhart's statement, "The eye with which I see God, is the same eye with which God sees me. My eye and God's eye is one eye, and one sight, and one knowledge, and one love."

The hesychastic tradition counsels us to enter the heart. This means to enter into relationship with your deep self, to find God in the profundity of your being, to discover the true dimension of your personhood in God, and to realise yourself as created in the Divine image and likeness. How, then, are we to enter the heart?

I think a few points need to be established before we begin to address the question of how to enter the heart. First, entering the heart is not necessarily a one-time event. While the heart does have some corporeal, physical, aspects, entry into the heart is not the same as entering physical space. In physical space we are either here or there, in or out. Entry into the heart is an ongoing process of entering. The human spirit naturally longs to know God. There is no end to this learning. We aspire to ever deeper knowledge of God - entering ever deeper into the heart.

Secondly, entry into the heart is a relationship of intimacy with the Blessed Trinity. In this regard entering the heart is more about a way of being than it is about taking a particular action.

Finally, there is no one “right” way to enter the heart, just as there is no one “right” way, or method, of falling in love. God’s relationship with each one of us is unique and personal, so is our entry into the heart.

So, how do we enter the heart? Anna’s presence in the temple at the presentation of our Lord, is our invitation to enter the temple of our heart. Luke tells us she remained in the temple - the heart - praying and fasting day and night.

Prayer is always the starting point. The classic prayer for entering the heart is the Jesus Prayer, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.” The continual invocation of the Holy Name guides us into inner stillness, silence, and awareness of God - the place of the heart.

Fasting begins with the recognition that human beings are by nature hungry, and that our deepest hunger is for God. In fasting we abstain from certain food, drinks, other things, thoughts, attitudes, even activities, in order to more intentionally feel our hunger. We let go of the many things we use to fill and satisfy our self - things that are really nothing more than substitute gratifications. Fasting teaches us what is truly nourishing and life-giving. Fasting prepares us, and creates a space within us to receive the “true bread from heaven.”

Finally, silence and solitude are essential to entering the heart. They can be seen as forms of fasting and necessary components to true prayer. Silence and solitude are both more about presence, than the absence of noise or people. They are interior qualities and not determined by the surrounding environment, though a practice of some external silence and solitude is necessary.

These are not the exclusive means to enter the heart but starting points. Perhaps the simplest and most foundational practice is for us to simply show up before God. Show up with the intention to be fully present to God. Show up with your full attention on God’s presence.