

# Sacred Heart of Jesus

Peterborough Priests' Retreat

8 June 2018

Dear Bishop Dan and brother priests:

## *Introduction*

As you know, we are ending our retreat on the World Day of Prayer for the Sanctification of Priests, fittingly celebrated on this Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. People today around the world are praying for us, but for a particular reason: that we may become holier, “sanctified,” because then we will be even more the priests they want – and, at some level – expect us to be.

A cynic could say that in celebrating this Day the lay faithful have arranged to “outsource” their own call to holiness, but I don’t think that’s the case. They just want holy priests, good priests, who, as Bishop Dan mentioned yesterday, are bridge-builders and not screens for God’s grace to reach them through the power of the Word we preach and the Sacraments we celebrate.

## *Tenderness of the Feast: Hosea*

This Solemnity is all about God’s love, which is amply conveyed in the reading from the Prophet Hosea.

In the First Reading we enter into the tenderness of God: God tells his people how much he loves them, how much he cares for them. What he says to his people, in this Reading from the Prophet Hosea, he says to each one of us.

God teaches us to walk. The Almighty abases himself and teaches

me how to walk. I recall the phrase from Deuteronomy, when Moses says to his people: “Listen, when have you ever seen a god so close to his people as God is close to us?” And the closeness of God is tenderness like this: he has taught me how to walk. Without him I wouldn’t know how to walk in the Spirit.

This is the story of each one of us: “I was for you as one who raises a child up to his cheek and kisses her. And I bent down and fed her”. This is our history, at least it is my history. Each of us can read his own history here.

“Tell me, how can I abandon you now? How can I hand you over to the enemy?” In the moments when we are afraid, at the times that we are uncertain, the Lord says to us: “If I did this for you, how can you think I would leave you alone, that I could abandon you?”<sup>1</sup>

### ***Gospel Light***

In considering the Gospel, first an observation of a curious situation. Nowhere in the four Gospels, during his public ministry, does Jesus speak the words “I love you.” It is not until the Last Supper, the night before he dies for us, that he says as much: “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you” (Jn 15:5). Yet throughout his public ministry people are convinced that Jesus loves them. Why?

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Francis, Homily (12 June 2015).

Perhaps it is because as people encounter Jesus, they recognize a friend, someone who cares for them, who wishes to share in their suffering and their joys. He is someone they can trust; they can rely on him.

In the Gospels we find only a few references to the Heart of Jesus. Perhaps the best known is that from Matthew's Gospel, where we find a passage in which Jesus says: "Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart" (Mt 11:28-29).

The Eudist second antiphon for Morning Prayer draws attention to a passage where we read into the text the word "heart" as a way of expressing Jesus' intimacy with us: "Blessed be your Heart, good Jesus. Reposing upon it, the beloved disciple drank the water of your gospel of love to pour it on us."

### *Today's Gospel*

This brings me to a thought that came to mind in thinking about this Gospel. Often, following St. Ignatius, I guess, I put myself in the Gospel scene and identify with one of the people. Very often it's easy to do this: the wayward son in the parable, the lost sheep, the ambitious Apostle with the pushy mother, witnessing miracles, walking with Stranger on the road to Emmaus, fishing by the lakeshore.

Today it's rather curious. I was thinking about the Roman soldier

who stabbed Jesus' side – or heart – and witnessed the pouring out of blood and water. Now we know the multi-layered symbolism of this.

It is the water coming from the Temple of which the Prophet Ezekiel prophesied. It is the birth of the Church in the two Sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist. It is the new Eve, the Church, coming from the side of the new Adam.

All this is rich and beautiful. My image is a little rougher. It's the one soldier picked out of the crowd of them who actually does the piercing, who brings about the blood and water because of the thrusting of his lance.

This is not a tender image of God's love. Yet it is the greatest. The "handing over" of the Son by the Father for our salvation. And this is not just a drama to be watched from afar but one to take part in.

Because the gift of the priesthood has been on my mind this week, I put myself in the sandals of that soldier. He provoked the blood and water. He is me, insofar as from the Saviour I bring forth the sacramental life. I am an instrument of birthing the Church. It's not water or blood from *my* side, but from the Lord's.

I'm just his *agent provocateur*.

I'm the Crucified Lord's man with my people, leading them to him.

✦ J. Michael Miller, CSB

Archbishop of Vancouver