



## **The Sacred Heart of Jesus**

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Society of Jesus

Chicago Province | Detroit Province

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There seems to be something about the Sacred Heart that resists theological discussion. There is a little book by Henri Nouwen entitled *Heart Speaks to Heart: Three Prayers to Jesus* that I picked up during a retreat a few years ago. In the introduction Nouwen describes how he reached the same conclusion. He had embarked on a project, as he put it, “to write a contemporary interpretation *about* the Sacred Heart” but discovered instead “a real desire to speak *to* the heart of Jesus and be heard.” (*Emphasis Nouwen’s, p. 13*)

Like Nouwen, I have not practiced what one might consider a devotion to the Sacred Heart. In fact, typical of my generation, devotional practices are not a regular part of my Catholic practice. But one of the gifts of moving from the corporate life into full-time ministry, first with Charis Ministries, and now as the Assistant for Pastoral Ministry, has been the opportunity to discover these treasures of our Catholic heritage.

Every once in a while I turn to the 1959 edition of the St. Joseph Missal that was my mother’s from before I was born to read about the Saints on feast days or browse the “Treasury of Prayers,” which is where I discovered the Litany of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus. There are some beautiful images in this litany, some I find very grand:

Heart of Jesus, of Infinite Majesty  
Heart of Jesus, Sacred Temple of God  
Heart of Jesus, Tabernacle of the Most High  
Heart of Jesus, House of God and Gate of Heaven

And others more down to earth:

Heart of Jesus, abode of justice and love  
Heart of Jesus, full of goodness and love  
Heart of Jesus, enriching all who invoke you  
Heart of Jesus, fountain of life and holiness

In literary terms, litanies are a type of anaphora. An anaphora is a repeated phrase that lends emphasis and is derived from a Greek word meaning “to carry back.” In the recitation of this litany, we are repeatedly carried back to the Heart of Jesus:

Heart of Jesus, king and center of all hearts  
Heart of Jesus, desire of the everlasting hills  
Heart of Jesus, patient and most merciful

On retreat in 2006, when I discovered Nouwen’s prayers, I was graced to realize how patient and merciful Jesus has been with me. My retreat director had encouraged me to pray with my memories, specifically to imagine them in terms of a fable or fairy tale, “Once upon a time...”

Imagining this story led me to see Jesus’ singular, repetitive, invitation to me, enticements to lure me into deeper intimacy and friendship. As the narrative unfolded I could see that Jesus had placed a desire in my heart, one that I had been resisting. I did not trust, and was actually frightened of, where accepting that invitation might lead. Frankly, who in their right mind would chose a journey that leads to the cross?

Heart of Jesus, loaded down with disgrace  
Heart of Jesus, bruised for our offenses  
Heart of Jesus, obedient to death  
Heart of Jesus, pierced with a lance

One of the more vivid memories that surfaced in my prayer involved a service trip with Charis to Idabel, Oklahoma. Our group worked with Fr. John, an energetic Glenmary priest at a small mission parish. Full of wisdom and a heart for the many poor of his rural community, Fr. John had arranged for our group of city dwellers to re-roof what was basically a small shack inhabited by a gentleman I will call Bert. One of Fr. John’s reminders as we started the job was, “Jesus calls us to feed the hungry and clothe the poor. He didn’t mean only those who are nice.”

Bert was a crusty old hermit, and, this being the last week of the month, he was waiting on his next social security check so he could refill his pain medication and buy cigarettes. Little by little, as the old roof was torn off and the new roof went on, Bert softened and would sit with us to share a soda and one of the “extra” white bread and baloney sandwiches we made for lunch.

Our trip in late June coincided with record heat. Those who were actually up on the roof (not I!) melted the soles of their shoes as those of us on the ground tried to carefully pull the stacks of sun-softened roof tiles without tearing them, or each other, apart in order to hand them up the ladder. Bert, of course, had no air conditioning and only a weak box fan that barely pushed the air around. Because of the extreme heat and our desire to finish both halves of the roof before we had to head back to Chicago, we decided one day to be up before dawn to try and beat the worst of the heat.

It took Bert quite awhile to come to the door that morning when I knocked to let him know we had arrived. I was worried about what we would do if he didn’t answer. Any concern I had quickly left me when he did. Bert opened the door and stood shirtless in the dark doorway with his arms up against both sides of the door frame and a scar on his side, probably from appendectomy, but what I saw at that moment was Jesus on the cross.

Later that night I sought out Fr. John. “I admire those who have the spiritual gift of voluntary poverty, but it is not mine” I cried, overwhelmed with heart-break for Bert and his circumstances, stunned by my encounter with the crucified Christ, and mortally afraid of material poverty, a poverty that to this day I find incredibly challenging.

I’ve learned that songs will come up as one of the means the Holy One uses to communicate with me, and as I pondered the mystery of that memory and others during my prayer, I heard a question in song: *Do you love me?*

This is the question that Tevye asks Golde in Fiddler on the Roof. “Do I what?” scoffs Golde.

“Do you love me?”

“Do I love you?”

Golde first calls him a fool, but Tevye is still persistent, “But – do you love me?” She then starts in with the list of all the things she has done for him and with him in the past for 25 years. And Tevye repeats himself yet again, “Golde, Do you love me?”

I realized that my prayer-conversation with Jesus followed a similar line. I avoided his question; I listed all the ways I have been ‘doing the right things;’ but I did not want to say IT out loud.

His question was a tender, quiet, and genuinely curious inquiry, not in the least condemning. He too was persistent. It started to dawn on me that the answer actually was, “*Yes, I love you.*”

Tevye might have been trying to sort out his emotions for Golde, and I don’t have reason to suspect Jesus was ever unsure how he felt about me, but I sensed us together singing:

“It doesn't change a thing.

But even so,

After twenty-five years (or forty-two or sixty-five)

It's nice to know.”

In the Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius asks us to pay attention to consolations and desolations to help us in the discernment of spirits. This moment on retreat was a deep consolation for me.

Heart of Jesus, source of all consolation

Heart of Jesus, our life and resurrection

Heart of Jesus, our peace and reconciliation

I experienced a sense of renewal, a release from fear, and a freedom to be open to where ever Jesus might lead me, knowing not just in my head, but my heart as well, that we love each other.

The bulletin board above my desk has lots of images, postcards, photos, each a reminder of the many ways I’ve encountered the Persons of Love. One of those images is an icon of the Sacred Heart that I received during my first visit to the Church of Gesu in Cleveland, Ohio, last fall. I also have a card from sent by a friend that reads:

peace.

it does not mean to be in a place

where there is no noise, trouble

or hard work. it means to be in

the midst of those things and still

be calm in your heart.

We are each invited by Jesus to join him in the thick of life, in ups and downs, in joy and suffering, in spiritual as well as material poverty. We are invited to grow into closer union with the One who loved us first even (or perhaps especially) when we falter. We are invited to discover loving Him in return.

Heart of Jesus, salvation of those who trust in You  
Heart of Jesus, hope of those who die in You  
Heart of Jesus, delight of all the Saints

Jesus, meek and humble of heart,  
make our hearts like Yours.

AMEN

### **Links**

For more information on Devotion click [here](#)

For more information on the Litany of the Sacred Heart click [here](#)

### **About the Author**

**Jenéne M. Francis** is the Provincial Assistant for Pastoral Ministry for the Chicago and Detroit Provinces. In this role she serves as a liaison and supports retreat houses, spirituality programs, parishes, hospital chaplains, and other Jesuits in pastoral work.

Jenéne joined the Province staff after serving as the managing director from 2003-2008 for Charis Ministries, an outreach of the Jesuits to those in their 20s and 30s. Prior to Charis, Jenéne worked for many years as a manager and senior research and development engineer at the Procter and Gamble Company in Cincinnati, Ohio. She holds a B.S. in Chemical Engineering from the University of Colorado and a Master of Arts in Religion from the Athenaeum of Ohio's Lay Pastoral Ministry Program with an emphasis on Adult Spirituality in the Workplace. While product development and pastoral ministry might seem worlds apart, Jenéne has always found common ground and great satisfaction in being part of projects that have the potential to improve the quality of life for others.