

The Heart: Where I Encounter God

Lecture notes by Deacon Scott Gilfillan

“Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.”

— Proverbs 4:23

My Experience of the Heart

One of the questions I have learned to ask myself—and others—is: What is happening in my heart? That question has become increasingly important in my own prayer and spiritual direction. Sometimes I don't really know what is happening in me until I stop and pay attention. I may think I am dealing with a particular event or decision, only to discover something deeper underneath it: fear, disappointment, gratitude, resentment, hope, a desire to control, or a longing to be loved.

The heart often speaks before it finds words. It speaks through desire, peace, restlessness, attraction, resistance, sorrow, joy, compassion, and even unexpected tears.

The spiritual tradition calls these the *movements of the heart* or *affections*. They aren't simply emotions to be managed, nor are they automatically messages from God. But they can become places of encounter—invitations to slow down, notice, pray, and ask:

“Lord, what are you showing me?”

1. The Heart Is Where We Encounter God

“The heart is the dwelling place where I am... the place where I live... the place of truth... the place of encounter.”

— Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2563

In Scripture, the heart is much more than the seat of emotion. It is the center of the person—where we desire, choose, trust, resist, remember, and love.

The heart is the hidden place where we encounter God before anyone else sees what is happening within us.

Prayer, therefore, is not simply something we *do*. It is an opportunity to bring our whole selves into God's presence.

We can say beautiful prayers while remaining guarded. We can know theology while avoiding intimacy. We can serve the Church while protecting parts of ourselves from God.

The spiritual life ultimately invites us beyond performance into relationship.

2. The Heart Reveals What We Treasure

“For where your treasure is, there also will your heart be.” (Matthew 6:21)

Jesus points us toward a fundamental question:

What do I treasure?

Our deepest attachments shape our choices and, ultimately, who we become.

Consider:

- What am I most afraid of losing?
- What gives me a sense of worth?

- Where do I spend my time and energy?
- What do I pursue when no one is watching?
- What might I be placing ahead of God?

The heart reveals what has our deepest allegiance.

3. The Heart Is Where the Masks Come Off

“The heart is the place of sincerity, where deceit and disguise have no place.”

— *Dilexit Nos*, 5

The heart is the place where we can become honest before God.

Ministry can create many identities: the competent deacon, the good preacher, the helpful volunteer, the knowledgeable spiritual director. These roles are valuable, but they are not the whole person.

God is not interested merely in the role we perform. God desires the person beneath the role. Spiritual growth requires increasing freedom to acknowledge what is actually happening within us—our wounds, desires, fears, attachments, hopes, and weaknesses.

4. Pay Attention to the Movements of the Heart

“Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart.”

— Luke 2:19

Mary offers a model of contemplative attentiveness. She does not immediately explain or resolve everything. She ponders what happens in her life and holds it before God.

Pay attention to:

- consolation and desolation
- attraction and resistance
- peace and persistent restlessness
- joy and sorrow
- freedom and constriction
- desire and fear
- unexpected compassion or tears

These movements are not automatically from God. They require discernment. But they can reveal places where God is inviting us to look more deeply.

Notice. Pray. Discern.

5. Enter the Inner Room

“Go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret.”

— Matthew 6:6

Jesus' “inner room” can be understood as an image of the interior room of the heart—the place where we step away from performance and distraction and become present to God.

“Behold, I stand at the door and knock.”

— Revelation 3:20

Christ does not force the door open. He waits and knocks.

The desire for something deeper, an unexpected consolation, a persistent question, a moment of sorrow, or an invitation toward greater freedom may all become opportunities to open the door more fully.

A Question for Prayer

Don't ask only:

“What should I do?”

Begin with:

“Lord, what is happening in my heart?”

Then remain there.

Listen. Ponder. Discern.

The heart is not simply where we experience our emotions.

It is where we encounter the God who knows us completely—and loves us there.