

“Finding the Heart: The Spirituality of Br. Columba O’Neil, C.S.C.”

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I-Introduction

When Fr. Charles O’Donnell gave the homily at Br. Columba’s funeral, he did so after thousands flocked to pay their respects to the man who became known as the “Miracle Man of Notre Dame.” As O’Donnell reflects on the presence of so many who came to honor Columba, he notes that the world places no significance in it. From the world’s perspective, Columba was simply “a shoemaker by day, and sometimes a nurse by night.”¹ Since Columba “contributed nothing to the progress of mankind,” O’Donnell states that the world merely sees an old man’s remains.² And yet, Columba’s death was publicly announced in several states, and “the faithful in a constant stream have approached his bier and touched their rosaries and medals to his hands.”³ In order to solve this mystery, O’Donnell stresses that they must adopt God’s perspective on Columba’s life, and see that Columba attracts so many to him, because he found the heart of Christ. As O’Donnell puts it, “It is the highest of all distinctions and it is attainable by the lowliest, nay, it is reached only by those who have learned of Christ to be meek and humble of heart. And such a one was our Brother Columba and such is the kingdom of heaven.”⁴

In this paper, we will consider Br. Columba’s spirituality, and how he came to find the heart of Christ. We will particularly consider the way in which Br. Columba embodied the humility of Christ through the promotion of his devotion to the Sacred Heart and Immaculate Heart of Mary. As Fr. O’Donnell rightly points out, Br. Columba was able to discover the heart of Christ, because he understood the meaning of Christian humility as a Holy Cross brother. Indeed, this is quite the undertaking, and we will barely scratch the surface. Nonetheless, I am

¹ Fr. Charles O’Donnell, CSC, *Circular Lette November 22nd, 1923*, 2.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

hoping that even this brief analysis of his spirituality will let us see how Br. Columba not only helped to cure people, but also helped them to find the hope of Christ in suffering.

We will begin by analyzing what Fr. Moreau says about the Sacred Heart of Christ and the Immaculate Heart of Mary in order to provide context for Br. Columba. Next, we will consider how Br. Columba embodied this devotion through the witness of his own life and heart, by analyzing Br. Ernest Ryan's life on Br. Columba and his letters. I will move towards the conclusion that Br. Columba invited others to embrace a spirituality of the Sacred Heart, because he recognized that the virtue of Christ's humility allows a person to gain perspective in terms of suffering and thereby recognize one's need for God.

II-Basil Moreau on the Sacred Heart

When Basil Moreau describes the Sacred Heart, he says that if one seriously considers it, one will come to see that it is at the center of human life. Not only does Christ's heart allow human beings to order their affections and to practice all the virtues, but also that it "is the principle of a life entirely consecrated to the salvation of the world, and the source of the precious blood that redeemed us."⁵ When a person allows himself or herself to enter into the Sacred Heart, he or she becomes fully human, because they embrace the power of Christ. Nonetheless, Moreau does not remain unaware of the difficulties in finding and entering into the heart of Christ. In addition to the problems of sin, human beings also love in a lukewarm way, which often extends to Christ as well. For Moreau, the solution becomes gratitude, for it is by this virtue which allows one to be annihilated by Christ's love. As Moreau states, "if...Jesus should deign to show his hearts as it is or only as he once showed it...opened by a lance,

⁵ Basil Moreau, *Basil Moreau: Essential Writings*, eds Kevin Grove and Andrew Gawrych (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 2014), 152. Hereafter cited *Basil Moreau: Essential Writings*.

surmounted by a cross, crowned with thorns, surrounded by flames, and blessed spirits adoring silently...we...would annihilate ourselves to profound adoration.⁶

Although Moreau says that we should annihilate ourselves in Christ, he does not mean that we lose our identity. Rather, Moreau stresses that “this annihilation into Christ’s heart” allows a person to realize fully who he or she is as a human being, because Christ first loves us. As Moreau stresses, “the virtue of gratitude obliges us to render love for love, or at least to recognize, as much as in our power, the benefits we have received.”⁷ From the depths of his heart, Christ loves his people so much that he takes the form of a servant and is born in a stable. Not only is Christ born as a human being, but his love compels him to be “sorrowful unto death in the Garden of Olives; and it crucified him on Calvary.”⁸ Furthermore, Christ also remains with his people through the sacraments, especially in the Eucharist. According to Moreau, when one truly beholds a heart that is willing to die and to remain with someone who is especially broken, one cannot help but immerse oneself in that love like the immaculate heart of Mary.

The Sacred Heart of Christ loves his people, by offering it for the life of the world. While our gratitude is essential in accepting and finding the heart of Christ, we cannot do it, unless God first loves us and is willing to enter into our suffering according to Moreau. Moreover, Moreau makes clear that Christ not only has to offer his unconditional love, but also that our willingness to accept the heart of Christ means our acceptance that we may suffer for such a gift. “So great a sacrifice,” Moreau writes, “could cause no pain to the eternal father, who is essentially impassable, whereas it could cause the august Virgin a woe so bitter, so profound.”⁹ Despite this

⁶ Basil Moreau, *Basil Moreau: Essential Writings*, 153.

⁷ Basil Moreau, *Basil Moreau: Essential Writings*, 154.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Basil Moreau, *Basil Moreau: Essential Writings*, 172.

seeming acceptance of hopeless despair on Mary's part, she understood that Christ does not take away suffering, but that his love transfigures it.

Moreau argues that her heart was so tender and so receptive to Christ's love that she was able to model her heart after his.¹⁰ While the other disciples certainly loved Jesus, Mary was able to love more, because she accepted the costs of her love. As much joy Mary would find in Jesus taking his first steps, she would also find much sorrow in watching his heart pour out blood on the Cross. Nonetheless, Mary "cooperated in the sufferings of her adored Son," and offered him for the salvation of humanity.¹¹ According to Moreau, Mary took Christ into her heart, because she was able to give that love back to him and to others through her gratitude. Standing with John, the Beloved Disciple, at the foot of the Cross, Mary gazed up at her son, and "turning upon her [with] his dying eyes still filled with love," Christ could still give his heart to her in the greatest moment of human suffering. With Mary now completely absorbed in Christ's love, her heart became immaculate insofar as she now possessed the humility and meekness of her son. As a result, she was able to give her heart to others such as John and become the mother of all, because she knew that the love of her son relieved all burdens. Moreau writes: "Thus, enfolding us all in the person of St. John, he presented us to Mary, saying, 'Woman, behold your son' (Jn 19:26). It was as if he said to her: 'New Eve, here is your family. You are, henceforth, alone, the true mother of all the living. You have borne all these children your sorrow, and I wish you to love them even as you have loved me.'"¹²

III-Br. Columba: Finding the Sacred and Immaculate Hearts

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Basil Moreau, *Basil Moreau: Essential Writings*, 173.

¹² Basil Moreau, *Basil Moreau: Essential Writings*, 174.

When Br. Columba made ten thousand blue badges for Mary, he realized that his heart would become immaculate like hers, if he would respond and would seek to find the unconditional love that Christ had given him. As Br. Ernest Ryan writes in his life on his confrère, Columba was born with clubfeet, and after his father Michael was told this by the doctor, he was afraid to tell his wife. Nonetheless, Columba's father "looked to where the picture of the Sacred Heart...[and] would let nature take its course. God knew what was best."¹³ Afterwards, Columba's mother came to her husband stating that not only did she know that her son had clubfeet, but she would also call her son John after the Beloved disciple who stood with Mary at the Cross. She tells her husband that she should name their son John, "because I will love him more than the others."¹⁴ Although Br. Ryan's words may seem exaggerated to us modern readers, it is clear that others associated Columba's heart with the same love that Christ gave to Mary and John at the Cross. Br. Ryan states that when Columba heard about the Brothers of Holy Cross, "a strange light seemed to come into John O'Neil's eyes, and a strange feeling of peace flooded his soul."¹⁵ In this section, I will show that Columba's vocation as a Holy Cross brother allowed him to realize the love of Christ in his own heart, and like Mary at the foot of the Cross, give that same love to others. As Columba's letters to Fr. George Giglinger attest, he promoted devotion to the Sacred Heart through Mary in order to show others that when they take on the humility of Christ in their hearts, they can see that the love of Christ brings meaning to their existence even in hopeless despair.

Even a cursory reading of Br. Columba's letters reveals that a number of healings were attributed to him through his devotion to the Sacred Heart. In one of his earliest letters to Fr.

¹³ Br. Ernest Ryan, CSC, *These Two Hearts: A Story of Brother Columba O'Neil, C.S.C.*, 3.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Br. Ernest Ryan, CSC, *These Two Hearts: A Story of Brother Columba O'Neil, C.S.C.*, 12.

Giglinger, Columba was able to cure two girls with asthma.¹⁶ When Columba was becoming more ill due to the effects of the Spanish Flu, he still traveled a little bit in order to bring healing to others. He discusses with Fr. Giglinger in a letter dated June 24, 1919, that he sought to help cure a boy at Burlington, who was suffering fits due to a fall.¹⁷ More importantly, Columba always prayed for cures through Mary and Jesus. He told Fr. Giglinger to advise a girl to wear the Sacred Heart of Jesus badge, to pray to Jesus to cure her five times a day, and to pray for her cure through the Immaculate Heart of Mary.¹⁸

In the Gospel of John, when the crowd follows Jesus after the feeding of 5,000, he implores them not to search for signs, but reminds them that they have gone after him, because they desire his love. Jesus tells them that “Amen, amen, I say to you, you are looking for me not because you saw signs but because you ate the loaves and were filled” (John 6:26, NAB). Similarly, Br. Columba understood that this power to heal did not arise from the badges which he made for people; he was not a magician. Rather, these badges of the Immaculate Heart of Mary and the Sacred Heart of Jesus were sacramental signs; they pointed to something else. These badges referred to love for which the Sacred Heart of Jesus was poured out to the world through the Incarnation, and the same love which Mary had for her son and was able to share with others. It was the love of Christ which allowed Columba to heal so many individuals both physically and spiritually. As mentioned earlier, Fr. O’Donnell notes that Columba was close to the heart of Christ, because he possessed humility and knew that salvation and healing depends on the love of God and loving one another through the Spirit.¹⁹ It was this humility which allowed him to gaze into Christ’s heart and see that the invisible is more real than the visible.

¹⁶ Br. Columba, CSC, to Father Giglinger, *Letter November 16th, 1912*.

¹⁷ Br. Columba, CSC, to Father Giglinger, *Letter June 24th, 1919*

¹⁸ Br. Columba, CSC, to Father Giglinger, *Letter October 9th, 1912*.

¹⁹ Fr. Charles O’Donnell, CSC, *Circular Letter November 22nd, 1923*, 2.

In a letter dated January 17th, 1913, Columba notes that he is on the way to St. Mary's college in order to visit an acquaintance. On campus, Columba emphasizes that he was mobbed by ten sisters who knelt at his feet begging him to heal them, by placing one of his badges-either of the Sacred Heart or Immaculate Heart of Mary- and making the sign of the Cross upon them.²⁰ As we can see from Columba's narration of this experience, this Holy Cross Brother seems like Christ. When Jesus is on his way to cure Jarius's daughter in the Gospel of Mark, the crowds are hanging upon him just to touch his cloak so that they can feel the healing power of his touch (Mark 5:21-24). Columba's description of the walk to St. Mary's campus echoes passages like these from the Gospel. And yet, as Columba makes clear, he is not Christ, but has only been given the privilege to share in Christ's love: "God honors me [h]umbles me at the same time / I have cures true [through] the Sign of the Cross using the badge / otherwise it would be presumption as the virtue is in the devotion not me."²¹

For Columba, this power to heal came at a great personal cost to him. He later tells Father Giglinger he is quite happy that many cures are being brought about through his devotion to the Sacred Heart as well as Mary's Immaculate Heart. He could have twelve cures one day with seven sisters who visited him the following day; Columba is truly overjoyed by these wonderful gifts from God. Nonetheless, Columba writes immediately after sharing this good news: "What a cross Our lord put on me / by no means I ever feel proud / I know he honors me but he humbles me at same time."²² Here, we can see Columba's pain and exhaustion; he is overwhelmed by the task that he believes that God has given him. He, however, carries his Cross with joy, and shares in the suffering of Christ like Mary, because he has seen love in the midst of trial. Humble

²⁰ Br. Columba, CSC, to Father Giglinger, *Letter January 17th, 1913*.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Br. Columba, CSC, to Father Giglinger, *Letter August 8th, 1913*.

enough to see beyond his own pain, Columba is able to enter into the heart of Christ. For this reason, he can see that the love of Christ brings consolation to him in body and soul. As a result, the Cross becomes his hope, because he knows that God is there just as he was for Mary on the Cross.

Furthermore, Columba received comfort himself in suffering, and offered consolation to others through his devotion to the Sacred Heart, especially by his desire to build a shrine. St. Paul writes that “if we are afflicted, it is for your encouragement and salvation” (2 Cor 1:6 NAB). Br. Columba understood that we share the lot of suffering, and that we are also joined to each other by the love of Christ. As he emphasizes to the bishop’s sister from Chicago, “you know what you read in the books about afflictions from God / that's our share.”²³ Since Christ gave his heart to humanity by taking upon himself our suffering, Columba saw that it could be transfigured. With Christ’s love ever present in our humanity, we could be joined to his love and offer consolation to one another. On April 30, 1917 Br. Columba had written Fr. Giglinger that he had received 1,100 letters for cures.²⁴ While this news thrilled Columba, he more overjoyed that he had received \$3,500 dollars to continue to build his shrine to Jesus’s Sacred Heart.²⁵ Columba states that one reason that he desired a shrine so much to the Sacred Heart was the fact that he could provide adoration of the Eucharist to so many. Columba writes that “I will open my visits [to the Blessed Sacrament] in the log chapel / it is fixed up fine / first Sunday in May / from 3 to 5 [pm] the Blessed Sacrament is keep there / it will have more affect /everything is fine.”²⁶ Christ offered his heart through his incarnation and continued to give his love to his

²³ Br. Columba, CSC, to Father Giglinger, *Letter February 7, 1914*.

²⁴ Br. Columba, CSC, to Father Giglinger, *Letter April 30, 1917*.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

people through the Eucharist. Just as Mary bestowed this love on the Cross, Columba wanted to give others that same hope, and show that Christ's heart was the light of the world.

Columba could not have had a heart like the Blessed Mother, unless he possessed a deep and abiding understanding that God's love governed the world, and as a son of Moreau he trusted in that providence. As Columba notes to Fr. Giglinger, he will always pray that individuals will be cured, but he also acknowledges that "some get it and some don't."²⁷ It appears that Fr. Giglinger was distraught over the fact that many of his people did not receive cures from Br. Columba's prayers. In response, the brother reminds his friend to be simple, and remember that God's ways are often inscrutable to the human heart: "Sorry all aint cured but you are aware of God's providence."²⁸ The important thing, according to Br. Columba, is to remain humble by abiding in the love of the Sacred Heart of Christ so that God can use that love to help his people.

IV-Conclusion

In conclusion, Br. Columba possessed a simple spirituality, that of the humble heart of Christ. Like Mary, Columba shared in the suffering of Christ and tried to incarnate God's love through his badges, prayers, and shrine. Fr. Charles O'Donnell notes that from the world's perspective, Br. Columba offered nothing, but that from God's perspective Br. Columba gave what was best: his heart.²⁹ By abiding in the heart of Christ, Br. Columba brought hope to a despairing world and returned them to a beauty ever ancient and ever new.

²⁷ Br. Columba, CSC, to Father Giglinger, *Letter November 16, 1912*.

²⁸ Br. Columba, CSC, to Father Giglinger, *Letter January 29, 1915*.

²⁹ Fr. Charles O'Donnell, CSC, *Circular Letter November 22nd, 1923*, 2.