

I) Introduction

1. Why is it utterly necessary for all Christians to reflect on the meaning and destiny of the human heart?

Christianity has everything to do with the human heart. Original sin was conceived in the human hearts of Adam and Eve. The eating of the forbidden fruit was simply the subsequent expression of an inner change of attitude that originated in their hearts. Jesus taught that it's what proceeds from the *heart* that defiles a man (Matt 15:18). The Catechism states, "This first alienation engendered a multitude of others. From its outset, human history attests the wretchedness and oppression *born of the human heart*" (CCC 1739). Our Holy Father, referring to the Garden of Eden, says, "This covenant was broken in man's heart" (G. A. of April 30, 1980). If we want to get at the root causes of man's fall and redemption we must zero in on the human heart, which is truly the battleground of salvation history.

It is clear from scripture and tradition that when we distill the reality of the human drama of every individual heart in the history of mankind it ultimately ends in one of two places, heaven or hell. The two standards, the two ways, the two cities, good and evil, light and darkness. The battle of salvation history is for every individual human heart. Jesus and Satan, the two main contenders, are both striving to gain entrance into our hearts.

If we were to choose two texts from the Scriptures, which could summarize this contest, we could start with the last book, Revelation 3:20, "*Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me*". Most everyone is familiar with the famous painting of Jesus standing and knocking at the door that mysteriously has no handle on the outside. This door of course is symbolic of the human heart, and the absence of an exterior doorknob bespeaks man's radical freedom. The Saviour is depicted seeking access into our heart in an open and friendly manner.

The second text is a bit chilling. We are now confronted by the enemy of our souls. Let's analyze for a moment the encounter between God and Cain in Genesis 4:7. The Lord says to him, "*sin is couching at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it*". What a stark contrast from the ways of Jesus. There is clearly a sense of stealth and treachery implied in this word 'couching'. The Pope commenting on this passage says, "Certainly, like Adam, he is tempted by the malevolent force of sin which, like a wild beast, lies in wait at the door of his heart, ready to leap on its prey" (The Gospel of Life, 8).

If one were to pull a thread through this verse in Genesis, and then flip all the way to the other end of the bible and pulled the same thread through Revelation 3:20, you could stitch up the entire story of salvation history. The motif of the heart is undoubtedly a common thread throughout the Sacred Scriptures, and it has a great deal to do with the spiritual life of each individual human being.

2. The ultimate problem and its solution.

The problem all of us face universally is how to deal with the evil that strains ceaselessly to lodge in our hearts, and how do we restore our right relationship with God. This terrible dilemma is solved only through a union of our heart with the human heart of Jesus. The Second Vatican Council teaches us, "The whole life of men, both individual and social, shows itself to be a struggle, and a dramatic one, between good and evil, between light and darkness. Man finds that he is unable of himself to overcome the assaults of evil successfully, so that everyone feels as though bound by chains.

But the Lord himself came to free and strengthen man, renewing him inwardly and casting out the ‘prince of this world’ (Jn 12:31), who held him in the bondage of sin” (Gaudium et Spes, 13).

This thorny problem of our hearts being vulnerable to evil, darkness and sin is now met with a Divine solution, “Incomprehensible sign, set up in the world’s midst, between heaven and earth! Composite body, like that of a centaur, in which were alloyed what ought to remain eternally separated by the distance of awe! The divine Ocean forced into the tiny wellspring of a *human heart*! The mighty oak-tree of divinity planted in the small, fragile pot of an *earthly Heart*!” (Emphasis added) (Hans Urs Van Balthasar, Heart of the World, p. 49).

3. The need to first deal with the problem of determining what is meant by the concept, ‘heart’.

It is difficult to find a consensus of opinion among the various anthropologies, regarding the meaning of heart. St. Thomas does not consider it to be a spiritual faculty of the soul alongside the intellect and will, whereas, Dietrich Von Hildebrand does, “Let us admit that in man there exists a triad of spiritual centers--- intellect, will, and heart --- which are ordained to cooperate and to fecundate one another” (The Heart, p. 46).

The word ‘heart’ is used in Scripture over 1000 times, and copiously in Tradition, covering a whole range of figurative meanings. It’s used to represent all aspects and dimensions of personal existence, (eg. vital, affective, noetic, and volutative, or a combination of all or some). The heart is an elastic and fluid term, and more of a poetic metaphor than a philosophical concept. It is used freely and the reader or hearer is expected to make the intuitive connections.

It is wise for us to have a realistic anticipation that a certain merging and blending of ideas will undoubtedly take place in any overview of such a broad, spiritual and mysterious subject as the heart. To try to pin down the exact definition, location and source of the heart will prove to be difficult. There are a number of complimentary notions that we will look at. St. Thomas can help us align our expectations with reality as we enter upon this study, “When the acts of two powers are ordained to one another, in each of them there is something belonging to the other power: consequently each act can be denominated from either power” (Summa Theologica, Pt. I-II, Q. 14, Art. 1).

II) ‘What essentially is the heart?’

I am going to survey some of the basic meanings of the word *heart*, and reflect on its proper or improper activity. To begin with I’ll dwell on the most fundamental and extended sense, before I move to the more limited senses of the heart as the seat of *intentionality, affectivity, and decision*.

1. The Heart as the ‘Self’, or ‘Inner Man’.

The Catechism tells us that, “The heart is the dwelling place where I am, where I live... the heart is the place to which I withdraw. The heart is our hidden center, beyond the grasp of our reason and of others” (CCC 2563). The ‘heart’ in this passage speaks of the very being or existence of the person. The ‘I’ that dwells in this ‘place’ is the very form or the essence of the person. The former is the ‘that’ of our existence and the latter is the ‘what’ or ‘who’ of our existence. Where our essence and existence meet is the very heart of our being. Our being is a knowing and loving subject in a body/soul composite. The broadest sense of the heart encompasses the totality of our being. In this sense the heart

is the whole 'self'. The Catechism here follows the lead of the Old Testament, which employs this sense of the heart effusively, "Though a host encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war arise against me, yet I will be confident" (Psalm 27:3) (See also: Gen 18:5; Exodus 9:14; Ezekiel 13:22). It is interesting, however, that neither the will or the intellect is primarily used to describe the whole person in the Bible. Dietrich Von Hildebrand claims that, "It is not by accident that the Old Testament chose the heart, and not the intellect or the will, as representative of the entire interiority of man" (The Heart, p. 47).

Olivier Clement uses the term to form a composite that he coins the, 'heart-spirit', "Intellect and heart together form that heart-spirit in which a person collects, opens, unifies, harmonizes and enlarges himself infinitely." (Roots of Christian Mysticism, p. 204). Olivier, speaking in the tradition of the Desert Fathers, Isaac of Ninevah in particular, describes mystical prayer experience as a plunge of the intellect into the heart (cf. ibid p. 206).

Even St. Thomas employs the word in numerous places. He was well aware of its ubiquity in Scripture and Tradition. Curiously, even he does not try to tie onto the word a strict philosophical definition, but rather uses it to convey multiple meanings. Thomas was working in the Greco/Roman philosophical tradition, and therefore dealt much more extensively with the concept of *soul*, but he does refer to the heart in his Summa Theologica twenty or more times.

In one very mysterious and profound passage of the Summa, Thomas asserts, "For whenever we understand, by the very fact of understanding there proceeds something within us, which is a conception of the object understood, a conception issuing from our intellectual power and proceeding from our knowledge of that object. This conception is signified by the spoken word; and it is called the *word of the heart*, signified by the word of the voice" (Q. 27, Art. 1, Pt. I). Here we have Thomas using heart clearly to refer to man's deepest interior center, essence, subsistence, the very substantial form. St. Thomas carries the act of knowing all the way back to the subject. It is the person that ultimately knows. The conception issues forth from our intellectual power, and it proceeds from our knowledge of that object, which is ultimately contained in the soul. The intellect provides the knowledge, but the knower knows. This deep sense of knowledge he describes as the *word of the heart*.

We have now arrived at the very individuating principle of the human person. Our Holy Father posits that, "Man is unique and unrepeatable above all because of his heart, which decides his being from within" (G. A. December 3, 1980). According to Pope John Paul II, "The words of Christ, who on the Sermon on the Mount appealed to the heart, induce the listener, in a way, to this interior call... That concerns the very nature, the very substratum of the humanity of the person, the deepest impulses of the human heart" (G. A., October 29, 1980).

An additional point about the nature of this deepest ontological 'substratum' or metaphysical core of the person is that it acts as a container, storehouse, sanctuary, or treasury. It anchors man in being and provides a locus within which to receive the gift of Gods Word, "as for that in good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bring forth fruit with patience" (Luke 8:15). We likewise reserve the option of receiving into ourselves what is empty and vain, "And the word of the Lord came to me: 'Son of man, these men have taken their idols into their hearts'" (Ezekiel 14:3).

Man is a created being who remains always initially receptive; analogous to the soil just mentioned. His heart or soil is fundamentally receptive by nature in its very existence as derived from his Creator, and the *word of his heart* is also something that he must, subsequent to his having passively received his being/soil, choose to now *actively* receive as well. Creatures are like newborn infants, they have no true word of their own and will simply babble until they hear the word spoken to them and make it their own. This word of our heart ought ultimately to be the word of God, which we know is no other than

He who is the Truth, that we, being creatures, must accept, submit to and conform ourselves to. As Jesus explains in the parable of the sower, “The seed is the word of God” (Luke 8:11).

There is a clarification that needs to be made between the heart or soil, which is the being, and the word or seed of the heart, which is the contents or treasure, and even further from the spoken word or fruit that, according to Thomas, signifies or gives expression to the word or seed of the heart and proceeds ultimately from the heart or soil, “How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil man out of his evil treasure brings forth evil” (Matt. 12:34-35; Luke 6:43-45). Here there are three different things: the good or evil man, the good or evil treasure, and the good or evil fruit that the man brings forth.

What is also interesting about this Gospel parable of the sower is that only Jesus, as ‘The Word’, *truly* speaks a word to our hearts. Satan only snatches, starves and chokes the word. Satan, being a creature like us, cannot really create his own counter word. Satan’s words lack any conformity with objective reality. They defy the very definition of truth. There is only one Word, as there is only one Truth. To put our faith in the lies of Satan is to be in a state of denial, exemplified by the ‘scoffers’ of Isaiah 28, “We have made a covenant with death, and with Sheol we have an agreement... for we have made lies our refuge, and in falsehood we have taken shelter”. What is the Lord’s response to all of this? “Hail will sweep away the refuge of lies, and waters will overwhelm the shelter. Then your covenant with death will be annulled, and your agreement with Sheol will not stand”.

It is our radical choice who we choose to open the door to and receive into our hearts on a daily basis, Satan or Jesus. In these choices we speak the word of our hearts and lay hold of our treasure, or as the Pope says, ‘we decide our being from within’. Will we choose the good or evil seed, the ways of God or idols, light or darkness, living waters or a broken cistern? “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matt 6:21; Luke 12:34).

The inner landscape of the heart is where we rendezvous with our Lord, “The heart is the place of this quest and encounter” (CCC 2710). So, as creatures, do we possess ourselves so radically that we can lock God out of our hearts? The Lord of whom it is said, “In him we live and move and have our being”? (Acts 17:28) Is Jesus on the outside looking in, as it appears in the picture of him knocking on the door of our heart?

For fact, however, Jesus already has right of entry into our hearts, since he created them and sustains them in being, “The Lord looks down from heaven... he who fashions the *hearts* of them all” (Psalm 33:13-15), and in whom, “all things hold together” (Col 1:17). He has, ‘searched us and knows us’ (Psalm 139:1). Indeed, “thou, thou only knowest the hearts of all the children of men” (1Kings 8:39).

With this notion of the heart we have arrived at the very source of our personal life. As persons we are capable of an interiority, self-awareness or presence, which we refer to as an ‘*inner life*’, “A person is, of course, among all the varied objects of the visible world, that unusual one which is endowed with an inner self of its own, and is capable of an inner life” (Love and Responsibility, Karol Wojtyła, p. 114). True, subjective awareness or self-presence is a means to our final end, which is the presence of God face to face, but lets concentrate for a moment on the encounter we ought to have with ourselves, before we are able to respond appropriately to the ‘King and Center of all hearts’ (from the Litany to the Sacred Heart). The Council can help us here to understand even more clearly that, “Man... by his power to know himself in the depths of his being he rises above the whole universe of mere objects. When he is drawn to think about his real self he turns to those deep recesses of his being where God who probes the heart awaits him, and where he himself decides his own destiny in the sight of God” (Gaudium et Spes, 14).

The reason a brute animal has no personal life is because it lacks this ability to act 'through itself'. As spiritual beings we have an interiority that allows us to dwell 'with' ourselves. Man can 'bend back' upon himself and perceive his own existence. That sets him apart from non-personal being. Only a spiritual being could perform this sort of 'maneuver'. "Between the psyche of an animal and spirituality of a man there is an enormous distance, an uncrossable gulf" (Love and Responsibility, p. 121).

There is a distinction to be made, however, between perceiving oneself as object or as subject. We are capable of both, but in this reflection we are referring to a subjective 'relationship' we have to ourselves. We relate to ourselves and to others properly as persons when we are in relation to a subject and not an object. A *who*, and not a *this*, *that*, or *it*. John Paul II asserts, "The category of the heart is, in a way, the equivalent of personal subjectivity" (G. A. December 3, 1980). The heart in this sense is that place where the nearly continuous subjective dialogue goes on between us and ourselves. The Psalms speak very eloquently of this phenomenon, "I commune with my heart in the night; I meditate and search my spirit" (77:6). It is in this 'communion' we have with ourselves that we determine what our stance is towards reality, our fundamental attitude toward being, the source of our world view.

The Scriptures are replete with examples of this inner dialogue one has with oneself that is a property of all personal life, eg. Divine, angelic or human. "The Lord *said in his heart*, 'I will never again curse the ground because of man'" (Genesis 8:21). Lucifer himself was thrown down as a result of the self-deception of his own heart, "You *said in your heart*, 'I will ascend to heaven; above the stars of God I will set my throne on high... I will make myself like the Most High', But you are brought down to Sheol, to the depths of the Pit" (Isaiah 14:12-15). It was this same folly that Obadiah rebuked in the Edomites, "The pride of your heart has deceived you, you who live in the clefts of the rock, whose dwelling is on high, who *say in your heart*, 'Who will bring me down to the ground?'" (Obadiah 3). What are we saying in our hearts? This is what we desperately need to be attuned to.

To avoid deception requires a great deal of work on our part. It may often seem like we are on a downward escalator. "This requirement of interiority is all the more necessary as life often distracts us from any reflection, self-examination or introspection" (CCC, 1779). Distraction is one of the number one enemies of the inner life., "The habitual difficulty in prayer is distraction" (CCC, 2729). Sirach describes the one who is dominated by distraction in this way, "The heart of a fool is like a cart wheel, and his thoughts like a turning axle" (33:5). St. Thomas \sphericalangle Kempis, one of the great masters of the spiritual life, is no stranger to the problem, "Even after making a strong effort to arouse ourselves from slumber, Alas! After a slight recollection, we soon wander away... So easily distracted, so seldom fully recollected in yourself" (The Imitation of Christ, 3, 31, 4: 4, 7, 2). If we cannot maintain a certain composure of our hearts, how can we ever enter into a relationship with God?

The Scriptures are emphatic about the dire need to be recollected. In the Old Testament Yahweh says to the Israelites, "Only take heed, and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget... Take heed to yourselves lest you forget the covenant of the Lord your God... Take heed lest your heart be deceived... lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul" (Deuteronomy 3:9, 23; 11:16ff). Proverbs wisely counsels us to, "Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life" (4:23) And Sirach calls us on to, "establish the counsel of your own heart" (37:13). How often did our Lord insist that we remain alert, awake, and vigilant?!

What we are after is more than just a cerebral exercise or intellectual technique. More than merely being conscious, we must be awake and aware. St. Augustine describes the struggle well, "The thoughts with which I meditated upon You were like the efforts of a man who wants to get up but is so heavy with sleep that he simply sinks back into it again" (St. Augustine, The Confessions, Bk. 8, Chp. 5). On the contrary we must maintain an attitude or posture that remains inclined and attentive to the

word of God even, in some sense, when we are asleep, “I slept, but my heart was awake” (Song of Songs, 5:2). Dr. John Crosby describes what is necessary to regain our personal subjectivity quite well when he writes, “I recover the center of my being. I take a distance to what I experience, or to my projects, and I can awaken to them. I become a subject facing an objective world, and not just the shadow cast in consciousness by the objective world... I awaken as out of a stupor” (The Selfhood of the Human Person, p. 102).

It is difficult to live out of our personal center or heart. This requires a loving effort. To transcend ourselves through our relationship with others is our destiny, and most especially in our relating to God. How often are we tempted to hide like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden? “The selfhood of the person is our strength and glory as persons, the source of our being *imago Dei*... a too heavy ‘weight of glory’, and then we want nothing more than to blunt our sense of selfhood by immersing ourselves and losing ourselves in many things” (The Selfhood of the Person, 104-5). Our Lord tersely declares, “This people’s heart has grown dull” (Matthew 13:15). One of Satan’s favorite strategies is to tempt us to lose heart and shun our destiny as persons, “Wickedness... has always exaggerated the difficulties” (Wisdom 17:11). He will do anything to get us to forfeit our glory, and trade in our birthright for a bowl of pottage (Genesis 25:29-34).

The goal of our recollection isn’t nirvana, but to prepare our heart to commune with the Blessed Trinity. We aren’t after absorption into the universe, but stepping back from it in order to regain our ‘I’. If we are not first present to, and standing in ourselves, and only then truly alert and listening, how will we ever be able to enter into a fruitful relationship with anyone? It is a necessary initial step towards God to compose our hearts, “Entering into contemplative prayer is like entering into the Eucharistic liturgy: we ‘gather up’ the heart, recollect our whole being under the prompting of the Holy Spirit, abide in the dwelling place of the Lord which we are, awaken our faith in order to enter into the presence of him who awaits us” (CCC, 2711). Of the three major expressions of prayer: vocal, meditative, and contemplative, the Catechism says that, “they have one basic trait in common: composure of heart” (CCC, 2699). Knowing the final end of our efforts to recollect ourselves, we can be sure the enemy of our souls will undermine our every step towards actual prayer.

St. Peter confirms this exigency, “Be sober, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking some one to devour” (1 Peter 5:8). St. Paul exhorts the Corinthian church, “I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ” (2 Corinthians 11:3). C.S. Lewis, in his famous Screwtape Letters, has acute insight into this insidious work of the evil one, “My dear Wormwood... Even if a particular train of thought can be twisted so as to end in our favor, you will find that you have been strengthening in your patient the fatal habit of attending to universal issues and withdrawing his attention from the stream. Teach him to call it ‘real life’ and don’t let him ask what he means by ‘real’... Keep pressing home on him the ordinariness of things... give him a grand general idea that he knows it all... Do remember you are there to fuddle him... Your patient, thanks to Our Father Below, is a fool... Keep everything hazy in his mind now, and you will have eternity wherein to amuse yourself by producing in him the peculiar kinds of clarity which Hell affords... Your affectionate uncle, Screwtape” (Chp. 1-2).

2. The Heart as the Seat of Intentionality

Referring to the famous passage from Deuteronomy 6:5, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might”, St. Thomas Aquinas teaches us in the Summa Theologica that, “Accordingly we are commanded to direct our whole *intention* to God, and

this is signified by the words, ‘with thy whole heart’” (Pt. II-II , Q. 44, Art. 5). He is correlating intentionality with the heart. In another place he refers to the heart as the ‘*intellectual appetite*’ (Pt. 1-11, Q. 24, Art. 3). He speaks elsewhere of the *movement* of the heart towards God, or as being *fixed* on God (Pt. II-II , Q. 44, Art. 5; Pt. I-II, Q. 109, Art. 9).

What exactly does it mean to ‘intend’ something? Websters dictionary defines intention as a purpose, a resolution, a directing, bending or fixing of the mind on something. Thomas asserts that, “Intention, as the very word denotes, signifies, to tend to something... It is evident that intention, properly speaking is an act of the will” (Pt. I-II, Q. 12, Art. 1). This sense of St. Thomas is the best place to start, in that, he is distilling the act of intention, ‘properly speaking’, to its root origin.

However, the concept will quickly become inflated after further analysis, “The character of intentionality is to be found in every act of knowledge... in every volitional response, and in every affective response” (The Heart, p. 54). The sense of intentionality Hildebrand was just referring to is that which properly belongs to a spiritual being, and it requires a, “meaningful conscious relation to an object” (ibid., p. 54). Thomas would surely agree that, strictly speaking, intentionality is an act which can only be performed by a rational person, “Irrational animals are moved to an end, not as though they thought that they can gain the end by this movement; this belongs to one that *intends*; but through desiring the end by natural instinct, they are moved to an end, moved, as it were, by another, like other things that are moved naturally” (Pt. I-II, Q. 12, Art. 5). To intend something belongs to the order of persons, “When persons act as persons, that is, act through themselves, their act is intentional” (Selfhood, Crosby, p. 83). Our intentions come from our core center. Only a person can intend. He alone acts from or through an ‘I’.

Here we have arrived at the very crux of our moral and personal life. The intentions of our hearts are what God is most concerned with. God can work wonders through us if we have the right intentions. A priest can be in mortal sin, but Christ can still bring about his Eucharistic presence through him, “The validity and efficacy of the Sacrament is independent of the minister’s state of grace” (Council of Trent, D. 855). However, the validity of the Mass does depend on the priest’s intention, “The minister must further have the intention at least of doing what the Church does” (ibid., D. 854). Another illustration of the utter relevance of our intentions, taken from the Old Testament, is the distinction that the Jews made between the murderer and the manslayer. On one hand, “the murderer shall be put to death” (Numbers 35:16), but on the other, “You shall select cities of refuge for you, that the manslayer who kills any person without *intent* may flee there” (ibid. 35:11). The Wisdom literature gives us one final example, “The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination; but how much more when he brings it with evil intent” (Proverbs 21:27).

The gravity of our intentions becomes further clarified by the teachings of Christ, “Everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her *in his heart*” (Matthew 5:27-28). The lustful man has given his consent to, or has *fixed his intention on*, his inordinate desire to gratify his sexual urge. The Pope reflecting on this passage of Matthew states, “She begins to exist intentionally as an object for the potential satisfaction of the sexual need inherent in his masculinity. Although the act is completely interior, hidden in the heart and expressed only by the look, there already occurs in him a change of the very intentionality of existence” (General Audience, Sept. 24th, 1980). This is the very thing John Paul II claims will ‘decide our being from within’. Is this unlawful fleshly desire essentially any different from God’s original intention that we not ‘covet our neighbor’s wife’? (Exodus 20:17). How does one ‘covet’? Is it not rooted in the intentions of the heart?

God places a tremendous responsibility on us. He desires to unite His saving power with the cooperation of our intentions, “God willed that man should be left in the hand of his own counsel (Sirach 15:14), so that he might of his own accord seek his creator and freely attain his full and blessed

perfection by cleaving to him” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 17). However, the Word will ultimately judge man by those very same intentions, “the word of God is living and active, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and *intentions of the heart*” (Hebrews 4:12).

An illicit shift occurred in the intentions of our original parents hearts. They turned the intentions of their hearts away from, or against, God’s will, and in so doing they lost their innocence, “The innocence ‘of the heart’... means a moral participation in the eternal and permanent act of God’s will” (General Audience, Feb. 6th, 1980). What is the permanent *act* of God’s will if not his intentions. We are called as creatures to ‘tend towards’ what God ‘tends towards’. There are a few common ways of expressing this in the Scriptures, *incline* or *set* the heart, or to be *after* the Lord’s heart. All these expressions seem to ring of the need to straighten out our crooked and perverse intentions, and bring them into alignment with God’s.

This re-directing, re-focusing or re-centering of our intentions is another way of expressing our desperate need for the conversion of our hearts. Mere external observance of the law is ultimately insufficient and unworthy of our personhood, “It is impossible to keep the Lord’s commandment by imitating the divine model from outside; there has to be vital participation, coming from the depths of the heart” (CCC, 2842). Much of the Old Testament is nothing other than God laboring to bring about this conversion of our hearts. The most clear cut example is the gradual maturing of the moral law from Mount Sinai to the sermon on the Mount. God wants us to act out of filial and not simply servile fear. He wants us to be moved or inclined to obey His Law by more than merely the mechanical force of our will. The Catechism makes this clear, “The Law of the Gospel fulfills the commandments of the Law... It does not add new external precepts, but proceeds to reform the heart, the root of human acts” (CCC, 1968). To reform the person we must get at the root of human acts. What is this root if not the intentions of the heart? This theme resounds with clarion force in the Prophets of the Old Testament, “I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh” (Ezek 36:26); “Rend your hearts and not your garments” (Joel 2:13); “Hearken to me, you who know righteousness, the people in whose heart is my law” (Isaiah 51:7); “All the house of Israel is uncircumcised in heart” (Jeremiah 9:26); “I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts” (Jeremiah 31:33).

3. The Heart as the Seat of Affectivity

Man’s will is not moved to form his intentions merely by logic alone. We do not determine our actions based simply on syllogistic argument. An important aspect of the heart is man’s affectivity. We are not machines. Our intellect does not command the will in a vacuum. We are affective beings.

According to christian tradition affectivity is mostly synonymous with the passions, emotions or feelings. The Catechism does not attribute spirituality to our affective responses. The passions are defined as, “Natural components of the human psyche” (CCC, 1764).

In and of themselves, apart from the intellect or will, the passions are held by the Church to be morally neutral, but they can also be, “Taken up into the virtues or perverted by the vices” (CCC, 1768). Our affectivity must be subjugated to the intellect and will, but at the same time, it can be either a help or a hindrance in our pursuit of holiness. One example of this could be the willingness of those who volunteered to help in the construction of a portable dwelling place for the tabernacle, “they came, everyone whose heart stirred him... all the women whose hearts were moved...” (Exodus 35:21,26).

It seems apparent that God wants us to be moved to charity through the affections of our hearts. We commonly associate fire with the passions. A passionate person is, ‘fired up’! Jeremiah describes his experience of the word of God in this way, “There is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my

bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot” (20:9). If we want something to be done we often hear the expression, ‘put a fire under him/her’. Hearing words that are related to fire, (eg. Combustion, ignition, enkindling), we immediately associate a release or surge of energy. The fullness of love is not simply an action commanded by the intellect and induced by the will, but an affective response, “The perfection of the moral good consists in man’s being moved to the good not only by his will but also by his heart” (CCC, 1775).

Dietrich Von Hildebrand asserts that in man affectivity exists alongside intellect and will as a third spiritual center or faculty of the soul. This third center of man he calls, the heart. Here he diverges from the traditional thomistic anthropology, however, if we follow him for a moment, we will mine some insights worth considering. One of the principle theses of his book, The Heart, is that an important distinction must be made between emotion and this spiritual notion of affectivity. For Hildebrand, the former is caused, while the latter is motivated. The higher ‘Affective responses’ for him are more than simply ‘psychic states’. He uses the example of the effect alcohol has in often producing in us a sort of euphoria or festive spirit. This phenomenon is caused by something exterior to us. It’s not brought about through an inner perception of a value that calls for and ‘awakens’ in us a deep response of joy or elation. How can we put this state of tipsiness on par with Mary’s response to Elizabeth’s greeting? “My spirit exults in God my Saviour” (Luke 1:47). For Hildebrand, it is the fact that our affective responses are bound up with intentionality that suggests the spiritual nature of affectivity, “Intentionality... is precisely one essential mark of spirituality” (p. 54).

When we hear Christ tell us, “I came to cast fire on the earth; and would that it were already kindled!” (Luke 12:49), is he simply trying to stimulate an emotional or ‘psychic state’? If we grant Hildebrand’s line of reasoning about the heart, we must admit that this metaphor of the fire that our Lord uses is symbolic of a deep, intentional, tender affective response of charity, which would issue from our heart, in imitation of his heart, “Love one another; even as I have loved you” (John 13:34).

4. The Heart as the Seat of Conscience

The heart is the place where we decide what our intentions will be. This is the dialogue with ourselves and with God, “For man has in his heart a law inscribed by God... His conscience is man’s most secret core and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths” (Gaudium et Spes, 16). Here is where the Lord knocks and sin couches. Whom do we invite across the threshold and into our inner life? According to the Catechism, it is the, “*heart*, in the biblical sense of the depths of one’s being, where the person decides for or against God” (CCC, 368).

To begin the process we need the composure of heart, and recollection in the self, that we have spoken of much earlier, “It is important for every person to be sufficiently present to himself in order to hear and follow the voice of conscience” (CCC, 1779). Next, we need to be disposed to hear the voice of God, “When he listens to his conscience, the prudent man can hear God speaking” (CCC, 1777). We must factor in the affectivity to this process as well. Hopefully, the man’s passions influence him towards the good.

The section of the Catechism dealing with moral conscience (Pt. 3, Art. 6), teaches us about the threefold process of decision making. The first is the mere perception of the principles of morality. Ignorance at this stage could cut off the possible aid of an affective value response based on a perceived moral good or evil. Next comes a practical discernment. Here is where prudence and the helps of the Holy Spirit are absolutely necessary to avoid the deceptions of the evil one, “discernment unmask the lie of temptation, whose object appears to be good, a ‘delight to the eyes’ and desirable, when in reality its fruit is death” (CCC, 2847). The last step in the decision process is the final judgment about an act

before or after it has been carried out. The judgment concerning the act yet to be performed is the intention of the heart. The fruit of that judgment ‘after the fact’, produces a secondary judgement of the persons right or wrong course of action. Usually accompanying this subsequent judgment, in the wake of our actions, there is an affective response for good or naught: “The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart” (Psalm 19:8), “afterward David’s heart smote him” (1 Samuel 24:5). This built in incentive against sin of self-accusation can be silenced by man’s disordered passion, which, “originating in carnal concupiscence, suffocates in his heart the most profound voice of conscience, the sense of responsibility before God” (General Audience, Sept. 10th, 1980).

III) Conclusion

I began this paper by saying that original sin is ultimately traceable to the human heart. If our redemption is to be total, it demands that God reach down into the very seat of man, into his heart, in order to save him. This is precisely what the Church teaches, “The redemption of the world... is, in its deepest roots, the fullness of justice in a human heart, the Heart of the Firstborn Son, so that it may become justice in the hearts of many human beings” (Redemptor Hominis, par. 9).

Man was created in the image and likeness of God, however, “disfigured by sin and death, man remains ‘in the image of God,’ in the image of the Son, but is deprived ‘of the glory of God,’ of his ‘likeness’... The Son himself will assume that ‘image’ and restore it in the Father’s ‘likeness’ by giving it again its Glory, the Spirit” (CCC, 705). So, if we are to be restored we must look to Jesus Christ to see what we must become, “Christ... fully reveals man to himself and brings to light his most high calling” (Gaudium et Spes, 22).

What is man’s ‘high calling’? “The ultimate end of the whole divine economy is the entry of God’s creatures into the perfect unity of the Blessed Trinity” (CCC, 260). This end is accomplished beginning with the fact that Jesus has joined himself to all men through His incarnation (CCC, 432). An age old axiom of the Church Fathers was that if something belonging to man was not assumed by Christ then it was not redeemed, “All things therefore (of our nature) he assumed, that he might make all holy” (St. John Damascene, De Fide Orth. III, 6). It follows then that Jesus also took on a human heart, in every sense of what the heart means. This Heart was filled with the Spirit of God. Jesus tells us to, “Abide in me, and I in you” (John 15:4). Through our union with the humanity of Jesus we are restored to the image and likeness of God, and reconciled to the Father. Indeed, we are brought into the very Divine life, “For the Son of God became man so that we might become God” (CCC, 460).

*“My son, give me your heart”
(Proverbs 23:26).*