

A reflection on the heart in the Orthodox Christian tradition: During the Divine Liturgy – at the beginning of the prayer to consecrate the gifts of bread and wine – the Priest faces the people and intones: “Let us lift up our hearts!” God accepts the praise of those who pray with their whole heart (Litany of Supplication). Indeed, “Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.” (The Third Antiphon, the Beatitudes). What is this heart? Many see the heart simply as a physical object opposed to the head (mind). The head – our rational mind – is the place of objectivity and rationality; the heart, however, is filled with a swarm of merely personal, subjective feelings. What should we do? Just engage in a head-trip of concepts?

Plunge completely into the heart surrounded just by our feelings? Find some way to balance them (usually with the head dominating the heart)? But this is not the heart in Orthodox Christian faith: May God strengthen us “with power through his Holy Spirit in our inner ‘man’ (being) so that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith” (Eph. 3:16-17). The heart is our inner person: the holistic center of our lives animated by the grace of the Holy Spirit. Our heart is the place where our entire being – physical, mental, affective, and spiritual – is unified to behold God: the Trinity and Christ; and our entire life is to be guided through the grace of the Holy Spirit (Met. Kallistos Ware).

Corrupted by sin, our heart is, alas, the battleground of good and evil within us. With God’s help, we struggle to be pure in heart by freeing ourselves from the toxic, egoistic passions and thoughts that separate us from God and everything else. That’s the purpose of repentance: a change of heart. We also struggle to be pure in heart by stepping beyond all of the ways through which we know and experience created things. We do this aspiring to be drawn by God into a unity with Him, who utterly transcends everything that is created, to become God-like or deified. Some in this life are graced to see the divine, uncreated light (the divine light manifest at the Transfiguration of Christ) and are transformed to behold and be united with the Trinity and Christ in their presence, their divine energies, to us (St. Gregory Palamas). All the righteous are so graced in the next life. Since God is perfect love, united with him, he send us to love one another as Christ loves us (St Maximus the Confessor). How might we enter the heart? How can we overcome the hardened heart that separates us from God, ourselves, and the world around us? More on that next month.

With your entire being, lift up your whole self to God in prayer, worship, veneration of icons, hymn chanting, setting aside all earthly cares and the ways of knowing and experiencing just created things. Try with God’s grace, as best you can, to center yourself in silence and “Lift up your heart!” as do all the saints. In Christ, Fr John

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