

# THE SACRED HEART AND THE ANGLICAN PILGRIMS

Rev. Jeffrey Steenson

On behalf of those who are attending this 2010 Anglican Use Conference, I bring these grateful words to His Excellency, the Most Rev. John Meyers, Archbishop of Newark and Ecclesiastical Delegate for the Pastoral Provision, as well as to his staff at the Pastoral Center and the Cathedral: we deeply appreciate your gracious hospitality and warm welcome. The Archbishop and Cathedral have a long history of hospitality to Anglicans. Today we say thank you for your permission to allow the Anglican Use Liturgy to be celebrated *ad orientem*. It is a noteworthy irony that 34 years ago a concession of a different order was made in this place, when Archbishop Gerety permitted the first *versus populum* mass in this Cathedral and permitted the consecration of the man who is perhaps responsible, at a certain visceral level, for launching all of us across the Tiber on the road to full communion with the Catholic Church. Who would this person be? Well, it would be John Shelby Spong, who was consecrated Episcopal Bishop of Newark, in this very place, on June 12, 1976. With apologies to Bob Dylan, I will simply note here that “*The Times They Are A-Changin’*” – “You better start swimmin’, or you’ll sink like a stone.” It seems prophetic!

I want to acknowledge the TAC Bishops present. Especially Archbishop John Hepworth and the members of his Episcopal college, who have led the way in petitioning the Holy See for the Anglican Ordinariate. We owe them a great debt for their courage and initiative, in acting upon Jesus’ words of encouragement: “Ask and you shall receive.”

It is a good thing that we are able to participate in the Mass here on the Solemnity of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus. Devotion to the Sacred Heart is not a prominent feature of the Anglican patrimony. Anglicans are inclined to look with astonishment on the anatomical detail of the Sacred Heart in Catholic art. And within the devotion itself, the concept of offering reparation for offending Christ's Sacred Heart tends to set off many alarms in Anglican theology. How could our prayers and devotions ever, in any way, atone for our sins? This is a very beautiful and profound dimension of Catholic theology that we must seek to understand, as our faith leads the way. Perhaps our experience as Anglicans who have come home to the Catholic Church may help shed some light on this.

Please forgive this brief note on the development of the Church's devotion to the Sacred Heart. I was taught that to think of it as the necessary counterweight to scholastic theology: the Catholic faith is not pure rationality but beats with a warm heart. The seat of God's love for us is located in the human heart of the Incarnate Christ. And because of the perfect and substantial union between the divine and human in the Person of Christ, we can say that the Second Person of the Trinity, the Divine Logos, has a human heart. "God has risked the adventures of the human heart," to quote Karl Rahner. He has loved, and empathized, and known rejection, and had his heart pierced and broken by the people he created and came to save.

The visions of the Church's mystics have helped us to see that Christ truly grieves, even now in his eternal Sacrifice, that his heart is broken, because his love for the world has been rejected. Even the charity of Christian people has grown cold. And we, who are called to share in his suffering and his redemptive work, we are invited to share this pain with him. Like the angel in the Garden of Gethsemane sent to minister to him and to comfort him (Lk.

22:13), the Lord draws consolation from those who share in his sufferings and seek to participate in his sacred heart of love. Only the sinless Christ can make the perfect offering and accomplish the redeeming, but even Dr. Cranmer allowed for the “sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving” of a grateful people, or in the words of beloved hymn writer Christina Rossetti, “What can I give Him, Poor as I am? ... Yet what I can I give him, Give my heart.” This is the deeply affective aspect of Christian experience, and devotion to the Sacred Heart will certainly find answering echoes in Protestant spirituality. St. Augustine heard the Lord saying, “Give me one who loves, and he will understand what I say” [*in Joh. 26.4*].\*

It may seem something of an irony that Pope Leo XIII, who gave us *Apostolicae Curae* to stir up Anglican consciences about their Catholic identity, should also have consecrated all of humanity to Christ’s Sacred Heart, in what he thought would be “the great act” of his pontificate (June 11, 1899). Perhaps the most prominent of the devotions to the Sacred Heart is the *Holy Hour*, which is rooted in Jesus’ words to sleepy Simon Peter in the Garden of Gethsemane: “Could you not watch with me for one hour?” (Mt. 26:40). Dear brothers and sisters, might we not advance the cause of the Anglican Ordinariate in this very way, by consecrating ourselves to Christ’s Sacred Heart, with tenderhearted compassion for the companions with whom we once walked along the Anglican Way?

We know how painful it has become for them, who yearn for Catholic Truth and for the means and the courage to embrace it. We may be sure that the Lord’s heart is utterly open to them. We must remember that the profound experience of entering full communion with the Catholic Church is at its heart one of conversion, because, by definition, it brings us more perfectly to Christ’s mystical Body and closer to his Heart. I am sure that the various elements of the

Anglican patrimony are going to be a great blessing to the Catholic Church. But let us remember, this is not about the exchange of ecclesial goods, as if our liturgy or music or poetry or pastoral traditions are marketable commodities that can be used to secure an honored place in our new homeland. Ultimately, this must be about conversion, not to a church but to a Person. We rely too much on ourselves, if we think that we can make this journey primarily on the strength of the intellect and good aesthetics.

Anglicans on the journey home have had no greater friend than His Eminence Bernard Cardinal Law, who has been diligently about this particular work of Catholic unity from the very beginning. He has been a counselor to many over the years, inspiring us with his large and generous vision for the reconciliation of Protestant communities. I am deeply indebted to him. I came to Rome, talking incessantly about “Church,” thinking that the guiding ecclesiological principle must surely be *ad limina Petri*. “Not precisely,” he said to me. “Remember, Jeffrey, this is not fundamentally about Peter but about Christ!” Those clergy and congregations who will be entering a season of transition and formation, in response to *Anglicanorum Coetibus*, will quickly discover for themselves this Christ-centered heart of the Church of Rome. This is the real Catholic Church who awaits the arrival of her separated brethren with open arms.

It seems right to conclude with the soon Blessed John Henry Newman. Here is the greatest of the sons of *Ecclesia Anglicana*, who understands that his extraordinary learning and high culture must be consecrated and oriented to the very Heart of Humility: “O most Sacred, most loving Heart of Jesus ... make my heart beat with Thy Heart. Purify it of all that is earthly, all that is proud and sensual, all that is hard and cruel, of all perversity, of all disorder, of all deadness. So fill it with thee, that neither the events of the day

nor the circumstances of the time may have power to ruffle it, but that in Thy love and Thy fear it may have peace” [*Meditations and Devotions*, III, 16].

\*The Anglican poet-priest Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy touched the essential matter [in *Rhymes* (London, 1929)]:

WHEN Jesus came to Golgotha they hanged Him on a tree,  
They drove great nails through hands and feet, and made a  
Calvary;  
They crowned Him with a crown of thorns, red were His  
wounds and deep,  
For those were crude and cruel days, and human flesh was  
cheap.

When Jesus came to Birmingham they simply passed Him by,  
They never hurt a hair of Him, they only let Him die;  
For men had grown more tender, and they would not give  
Him pain,  
They only just passed down the street, and left Him in the  
rain.

Still Jesus cried, “Forgive them, for they know not what they  
do,”  
And still it rained the wintry rain that drenched Him through  
and through;  
The crowds went home and left the streets without a soul to  
see,  
And Jesus crouched against a wall and cried for Calvary.

*The Reverend Jeffrey Steenson is the former Episcopal Bishop of the Rio Grande and entered the Catholic Church and was ordained a priest under the auspices of the Pastoral Provision. Dr. Steenson is a professor of Patristics at the University of St. Thomas and St. Mary’s Seminary in Houston, Texas. This homily was delivered at the Solemn Mass at the Cathedral Basilica of the Sacred Heart during the 2010 Anglican Use Conference in Newark, New Jersey.*