

## **Sacred Heart Novena** *Gardiner Street (6)*

A divided heart

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### **Introduction**

Welcome again to these evenings focused not just on the Sacred Heart but on our own: Is your heart in the right place? In the course of the C-19 crisis, a new phrase has become part of our daily vocabulary: an underlying condition. Tonight we explore our spiritual underlying conditions under the title "a divided heart. In some ways, this is the flip side of what we explored last night: the unfathomable riches of God's compassion to us all.

### **Topic**

Our question tonight is: do we have a heart to live and to receive such compassion?

### **Arguments**

Our Gospel tells the story of a certain "leader", with an apparently genuine desire to be good. Jesus starts with the usual response: this is how to be good. But the man demands more, boasting perhaps a little. Although perhaps not obvious at the time, Jesus does the man a great service: he puts his finger unerringly on one interior block which really prevents him taking the next step: radical discipleship. Unlike many stories in Luke, this narrative ends on a downbeat: "he became very sad, because he was very wealthy." This is the only time in the Gospel that someone presents him or herself for discipleship "unbidden" and it does not work because the "leader" does not truly know himself. That can happen to us too – the ideal is one thing, the real is another.

On our first night, the first reading led to a heartfelt question to the apostles: brothers, what should we do? The response given is repent and be baptised. As is commonly noticed, repent, although traditional, is not a great translation here: convert would be much better. Repent points us to sins and to the past. Convert points us to heart and to the future.

When people admit their sins, I feel like saying "welcome to the human race; will you be staying long?" Sins of course are real and need to be addressed. But they are really symptoms of an underlying condition. One of the great spiritual guides of our time, Thomas Keating, has a name for our underlying conditions: he calls them our "emotional programmes for happiness." These are not so much "moral" as psychological and existential. He names a few: passive aggression, low-grade anger, low self-esteem, selfishness, narcissism. These can often be traced to childhood, when they arose somehow as coping mechanism, a kind of crutch to get us through. They stay with us long after we need them and they hinder our path. Such underlying conditions stand in need of healing or in other words we need to be set free, to be liberated. When we respect the truth about ourselves "one's legs become that bit stronger and one is all the more capable of taking a stroll and enjoying the world, with that sensual vitality that is

loose-limbed in proportion to how free it is of the tangles of deceit and self-deception.” (Claudio Magris)

Last night, we spend on an open heart, in the sense of being open to knowing ourselves. How is it possible to promote a healthy and wholesome self knowledge which gradually enhances our lives? The famous examen of St Ignatius would be an easily accessible way. In a recent book published by The Messenger, Jim Manney, provides a simple and practical outline. The book is called *A simple life-changing prayer*. He guides us through five steps, each evening before sleep. The first is a prayer for light – that God may help us to see what is going on. The second is thanksgiving: it is good to begin on a positive, wholesome note. Then, it is possible to review the day: the people, the events, the tasks, the interactions, the moods and so on. Fourthly, face whatever is not going right or, more plainly, is plain wrong. The fifth step is to find the grace to do something about it – something specific and concrete.

Over time, such a practice would disclose both God’s grace and my own response; it would let me see myself as I am, with all my “underlying conditions.” Over time, it would open me to the grace of healing and the practice of being free – really free, to love and to serve with an undivided heart.

### **Conclusion**

In a word, we don’t have to be bound by our past all our lives, thank God. We are all invited to the same life-changing encounter with Jesus. In the words of Pope Francis,

I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day. No one should think that this invitation is not meant for him or her, since “no one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord”. The Lord does not disappoint those who take this risk; whenever we take a step towards Jesus, we come to realise that he is already there, waiting for us with open arms. (*The Joy of the Gospel* 3)