

*Spirituality
of
Father Victor Braun*



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Many people today claim to be enriched by a *personal spirituality*. An authentic Christian spirituality involves one's whole being - body, mind and spirit - in the quest for God.

Augustine of Hippo reminds us that *God has made us for himself alone* and that *our hearts are restless until they rest in God*. Over the centuries, Christian faith has embraced several great schools of spirituality. Each has its own distinct voice, symbols and practices. Each has its origins in a particular time in the life of the Church. Moreover, each is marked by the cultural, political and social context which helped to shape it and take root in the hearts of God's people.

The spirituality that shaped the life and mission of Father Victor Braun was the 19th century popular *Devotion to the Sacred Heart*. The origins of *this most excellent devotion* are to be found in that sacred moment in history when the Word was made flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mother. Indeed, the Word first took root in that cosmic moment when God created the earth which would *one day offer a home for Jesus Christ, the first-born of all creation*. The Fathers of the Vatican Council have highlighted for our age the profound meaning of the mystery of the Incarnation, *when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us*. Here it is

*while he was on earth
Jesus acted by human choice
thought with a human mind
worked with human hands
and loved with a human heart*

On Calvary that heart was pierced for love of us and from it flowed streams of living water, symbols of the sacraments of the Church of which Jesus himself is the founder. Sixteen centuries later, Our Lord appeared to Margaret Mary Alacoque, a French Visitation nun and showing her his wounded heart, spoke of his regret at the coldness shown to him by those who should know better



*Behold this heart which has loved so much
and yet receives so little love in return.
I ask you to spread this message wide....
and I ask from you love for love*

It is this added element of Reparation to the Spirituality of the Sacred Heart which Father Braun learned at his devout mother's knee and which his family lived out by the example of their Christian lives. The word reparation means that something has been broken and has since been repaired. It was our relationship with God that was broken and has since been restored by the incarnate Son of God, culminating in his excruciating death on Calvary. The resurrection of Jesus means that death's not the last word. This is verified by the gospel scene when Jesus invites Thomas to put his hand in his pierced side and then addresses us, in our time, when he declares

*You believe me, Thomas,
because you have seen me
Blessed are those who have not seen me
and yet believe in me*

Victor Braun was born into a middle-class, devout French Catholic family. As a child and a young schoolboy he was physically and emotionally frail. Victor was a serious-minded youth, blessed with a natural piety. His childhood days were happy, carefree and secure. As ninth in a family of eleven, he managed to find his own voice in what was a lively and diverse household. The whole family read with keen interest the *Annals of the Propagation of the Faith*, then a popular Catholic magazine. Fired by the exploits of several French missionaries, whose lives he had read about, the young Victor resolved to

become one of them and also follow in the footsteps of his elder, half-brother, Antoine, who had left home to become a Jesuit missionary in Canada. Reluctantly, Victor had to settle for the diocesan priesthood because his health was not robust enough for missionary life.

At the age of fourteen, he set out on a path which he himself later described as one *strewn with difficulties and obstacles*. For the first ten years of his priestly life he struggled to find his niche through a variety of pastoral placements. These included teaching young boys, a curacy in two run-down village parishes and as chaplain to a young offenders' institute. He also spent long hours in the confessionals of two Paris churches, one of them the ornate church of Our Lady of Victories. It was during the long hours he spent in the confessional that he came to know at first hand of the moral danger which many young working girls faced; some of them came from his own province of Lorraine. Often they ended up on the streets, alone and anonymous.

Having looked in vain for religious sisters to help him address the plight of these homeless girls, Father Braun realised that he now had to act himself. Not all the women who came to his confessional were working-class. From among this second group he chose four women who agreed to help set up a project to address the needs of young factory workers at risk on the streets of Vaugirard, a working-class district of Paris.

That same year (1866) Father Braun had an intense spiritual experience while attending the annual Wurzburg Conference in Bavaria; the keynote speaker was Baron Oberkamph; the theme that year was *Devotion to the Sacred Heart*. Shortly afterwards, while at prayer in the motherhouse of the Brothers of St. Vincent de Paul, a newly-founded institute which he had recently joined, Father Braun decided to change the status of his women's volunteer movement. This is how he later wrote about it.

*It was while praying before the image
of Our Lady of La Salette in Vaugirard
that the thought came to me
to form you into a religious institute.*

He was a reluctant founder, claiming always that St. Francis de Sales was the real founder. This is how he recalled that moment of grace in a letter to the early sisters

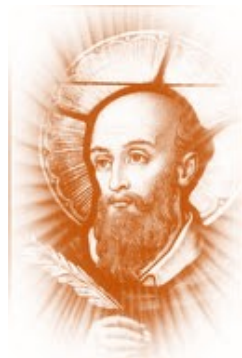
When St. Francis de Sales decided to found a new order in the church, he wanted his sisters to serve the poor and the sick and not to be cloistered. He was not permitted to carry out his vision as he would have liked. That is why, though unworthy, I have tried to take up the second part of his vision and transport his order of the Visitation into the world.

It is the spirit of St. Francis de Sales that I give to you, a spirit of humility, simplicity and gentleness, together with a tender care for the poor and the sick. St Francis de Sales is your real founder.

From October 1866 onwards, no mission was too hazardous, no obstacle too challenging, no physical impediment too arduous, that might prevent this eager founder from making known the love of the Sacred Heart through his personal service of the poor. This love was expressed daily in his care and concern for orphans, the sick, the elderly and, of course, young working-class women who were so exploited sexually and physically. Father Braun's motto expresses the twin pillars on which the religious congregation he founded is built

*There are two things in life
Jesus Christ and the poor.*

In his many talks and writings to the first sisters, our holy founder clarified what we in our day refer to as the **charism** of the congregation. The following statement emphasises the centrality of the Spirituality of the Sacred Heart as the core element of his personal spirituality and of his founding charism, in which we all share



*Many congregations who minister to the poor
are dedicated to the Sacred Heart.*

*But you are to belong entirely to the Sacred Heart
So be on fire with love, eager to make up for the evil
which threatens our world.*

*If ever you were to forget this Devotion to the Sacred Heart
you would no longer have any reason to exist*

The Spirituality of the Sacred Heart over time became weighed down by a series of *devotions* and rituals. Since the renewal called for by Vatican2, there has been a return to its scriptural roots. The element of *reparation*, or redemptive suffering, which Father Braun so strongly promoted, can be linked to today's emphasis on social justice, which also includes justice for our own planet so over-exploited. Reverence for the dignity of all of God's creatures, for human life at every stage, is also an integral part of this abiding spirituality. Our age is marked by the widening gap between rich and poor, between the have and the have-nots.

Where do each of us stand in all this?

The spirituality of the Sacred Heart offers another way of living out our Christian calling, one that will help bring about that civilization of love which is God's dream for his world. God has no favourites. A life rich in pastoral experience enabled Father Braun to develop a loving heart that was gentle, generous, humble, forgiving. He identified with those he encountered from all walks of life. Like his beloved patron, St. Francis de Sales, he refused no one who turned to him in their hour of need, at whatever cost to himself.

Four *icons* embody the spiritual values which we, Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, treasure as the spiritual patrimony of our holy founder. They were carved in letters of gold on the frontispiece of the altar in the convent chapel in Homerton in London's east end, the cradle of the English province of the Servants of the Sacred Heart. Let us pause to reflect on how these four icons can shape our spiritual lives even in this very different context of the 21st century.

GLORY The new cosmology highlights for us the unfolding wonder of our universe and our own place in God's creation. It challenges each of us to engage in an ever closer communion with the natural world around us and to accept personal responsibility for reverencing and respecting our environment. Zeal for God's greater glory includes on-going, earnest reflection on how we live out our everyday lives in whatever ministry we are called to serve. It invites each of us to look at what it is that binds us and prevents us from becoming the person God calls us to be. We pray for the grace and the will-power to choose what St. Ignatius calls the *magis* – the more. This in turn leads us gently but surely to the freedom which God promises to those who leave all for the sake of all.



LOVE This is a word whose meaning is increasingly undervalued in our liberal age. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to bring the compassionate love of God to those among whom we live and work. The fire of God's love draws us into the radiant glow which Jesus gained for us in his sacrifice on the cross. Love is never static; it is always on the move. The vow of celibacy frees us to make Jesus our first love both here and hereafter. He became poor for our sake, leaving us an example of how true poverty looks. As our outer life ebbs out in the service of the poor, our inner spirit takes on a new intensity in the service of love of him

who is gentle and humble of heart

Like Mary, who heard the word of God and kept it, even under the shadow of the cross, we, too, stand in solidarity with her and with all those who look to us for compassion. As Father Braun once said, we may not have much to offer in the way of material help but when our offering is joined to the heart of Jesus, what we have to give is inexhaustible because it comes from the ever-flowing riches of the Sacred Heart.



THANKFULNESS This was a favourite word of Augustine of Hippo who, throughout his life, linked thankfulness with God's loving kindness. He wrote once

All my memories are gratitude

We have so much to be grateful for. As age increases and strength diminishes, our personal gratitude to God becomes an endless litany as we call to mind the great things God has done in and through us, We can say with Mary

The Lord has done great things for me

The spirit of gratitude reminds us to thank our own family, who left us free to follow our call. What other life is enriched by the friendship of so many women who have supported and guided us by their example and comforted us in times of sorrow and uncertainty? On his death-bed, Father Braun, though in deep physical distress, demonstrated his constant concern for the well-being of the sisters. To those gathered around his bedside as he prepared for death he kept repeating how grateful he was for even the slightest sign of thoughtfulness. This was how he had lived and this is how he wished to take his leave of them.



REPARATION This term is not part of popular usage ; the term *Restorative Justice* offers a more nuanced meaning. The cross of Christ reminds us of the breadth and depth of God's mercy. All people, especially those whose lives have been broken, long for healing, for redemption and for the peace that comes after death. The pierced heart of Jesus is a constant reminder of God's redemptive love.



*He was wounded for our iniquities,
he was bruised for our sins*

Today the media presents us with an instant sweep of the enormity of physical, emotional and spiritual suffering all over the world. We can be overwhelmed by its intensity and our

inability to ease the pain of so many. The example of Jesus can transform our feeble efforts, when confronted with such a sea of ache. Each person Jesus met with went away transformed, even after the briefest encounter. Maybe this is yet another way we can be in solidarity with those in any kind of need, simply by our patient presence.



In conclusion, this passionate out-pouring on the meaning of authentic love sums up in clear tones what true love is.

Nothing is more practical than falling in love in a quite absolute, final way. What you are in love with, what grips your imagination, will affect everything. It will decide what will get you out of bed in the morning, what you do with your evenings, how you spend your week-ends, what you read, who you know, what breaks your heart, and what amazes you with joy and gratitude. Fall in love, stay in love, and it will decide everything.

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