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How Do I Love God With All My Heart?

ROMAN CATHOLIC SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

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Dear Father John, I want to love God with all my heart, but I don't know where to start. How do I do this?

LOVING GOD WITH all your heart means desiring him above all things and making your intimate, personal relationship with him into the highest priority of your life, the center around which every other facet of your existence finds its proper and glorious place. But how do you do that? How do you make that happen?

The heart expresses itself through the other three modes that Jesus identifies in the greatest commandment: loving God with all our soul, mind, and strength. Attending to each of those arenas, therefore, produces an indirect effect on the heart as well, educating and purifying it, and nourishing its Christian core. Nevertheless, you can also attend to the heart directly.

Thoughts of the Heart

We spend a lot of time thinking about the things we desire. When we treasure something, it occupies our mind. And, conversely, the more we think about something, the more we tend to desire it.

This is part of human nature; it flows from the connection between the two spiritual faculties that human nature possesses—intelligence and will, the power to know and the power to choose. For us human beings, these faculties utilize instruments to operate: our senses, our imagination, our memory, our emotions, and our passions. Unlike angels, whose access to truth and goodness is purely spiritual and immediate, human persons discover truth and goodness gradually, through the mediation of spatial-temporal experience. This is why we can figure out a solution to a complex problem by making diagrams and pictures, doodling, trying various alternatives in our imagination, and discussing it with others.

And so, what we choose to look at, think about, and daydream about will affect the desires that grow and mature in our heart. The intensity of our love for a certain object can increase or decrease according to how much attention we pay to that object and how much space it takes up in our external and internal senses (memory and imagination).

Tricks of the Devil

[http://spiritualdirection.com/wp-](http://spiritualdirection.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Gargoyle.jpg)

[content/uploads/2013/10/Gargoyle.jpg](http://spiritualdirection.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Gargoyle.jpg)) The devil understands this reality and uses it in the dynamics of temptation. St. James explains how temptation begins with something that stirs up a self-centered desire, and then, if we choose to pay attention to that desire, it grows. If we feed it with more attention, we will eventually act on it, committing sin. If we continue to act on it, the sin can become a habit and even choke off the life of grace:



Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire conceives and brings forth sin, and when sin reaches maturity it gives birth to death. (James 1:14–15)

The devil, agitating our fallen nature and the fallen world in which we live, will try to monopolize our attention with images, ideas, thoughts, and invitations that can lure us into self-absorption and eventually into destructive self-indulgence. The enemy of our souls wants to occupy our minds with a multiplicity of inputs that can divide our hearts, draining our desire for God and filling up our desires for any number of petty idols.

Spiritual Heart Supplements

Forming our heart in Christ follows the contrary path. To feed our desire for God and our desire to make our relationship with him the core and fountain of everything we do requires thinking frequently about him and his magnificent plan for our lives. Just as a little boy will feed his desire for a new bike by looking at a picture of that bike every day, so too we need to gaze at the Lord and savor his dream for us as often as we can. We need to feed the central desire of our Christian heart with thoughts that are in harmony with that desire. And we need to intentionally stir up those thoughts all the time. The Psalms frequently make choosing to think about God and his plans (his name, promise, judgments, testimonies) a central theme for prayer:

In my heart I treasure your promise, that I may not sin against you.... At all times my soul is stirred with longing for your judgments.... Direct my heart toward your testimonies and away from gain. Avert my eyes from what is worthless; by your way give me life. When I recite your judgments of old...I am comforted, LORD. Even at night I remember your name in observance of your law, LORD. (Psalm 119:11, 20, 36–37, 52, 55)

Most of the traditional pious practices associated with Christianity have this as their goal. Displaying images of Jesus, Mary, and the saints on our walls, desks, rearview mirrors, and screen savers; wearing a cross or a crucifix around our necks; wearing blessed medals; dropping by a church and making the Sign of the Cross with holy water; asking for a priest's blessing; praying before meals.... Practices like these set reminders for us to think about God. They can nourish the core desire of our hearts.

Eating Right

But the meat and potatoes of forming the Christian heart remain prayer and the sacraments... Without a real, growing life of prayer—in all of its forms, but most essentially in a daily, personal God-time—our core desire for God will always remain undernourished, and our spiritual growth will be stunted. Infrequent or superficial contact with the sacraments, especially the Eucharist and confession, robs our souls of essential spiritual nutrients. Jesus made this clear so many times:



<http://spiritualdirection.com/wp->

[content/uploads/2014/12/CharlesBosseronChambers_DetailFrom-ThyWillBeDone-sm.jpg](http://spiritualdirection.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/CharlesBosseronChambers_DetailFrom-ThyWillBeDone-sm.jpg)) On Prayer: “Then Jesus told them a parable about the necessity for them to pray always without becoming weary...” (Luke 18:1); “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you.” (John 15:7)

On the Eucharist: “Jesus said to them, ‘Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me.’” (John 6:53–57)

<http://spiritualdirection.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/ConfessionArtgateFondazioneCariplo-MolteniGiuseppeLaConfessione.jpg>) On confession (Jesus to his apostles): “Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.” (John 20:23)



So, God himself gives us a new heart when we become Christians, but he leaves it up to us to make that heart grow.

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Editor’s Note: This is another excerpt from Father John Bartunek’s new book “Seeking First the Kingdom” (<http://www.catholicword.com/catalog/public/seeking-first-the-kingdom.html>)” filled with “practical examples and down-to-earth wisdom which will show you how to bring Christ into each facet of your life”.

[Click here to learn more about the book...or if you wish to get it for a friend or relative who doesn’t read on line.](http://www.catholicword.com/catalog/public/seeking-first-the-kingdom.html) (<http://www.catholicword.com/catalog/public/seeking-first-the-kingdom.html>)

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