

## The 'Heart' in Eastern Christianity

# "The Seat of the Spirit"

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### **The Heart in Scripture**

The word "heart" occurs nearly 500 times in the Bible, signifying the seat and central place of diverse functions: the heart thinks, reflects, assumes responsibilities and is the center of moral and religious life. The heart experiences fear of God and here is where fidelity to God dwells (1 Kings 11:3-4). The heart embodies the fullness of the spiritual life that embraces the whole human person in all his or her activities. A person's actions: the face (Sir 13:25), the lips (Prov 16:23), the acts (Lk 6:44), all manifest what is in one's heart.

In every human person, there must be that mysterious point by which God enters with all God's riches, that "organ of the spirit." Since the heart is already the place of love, it remains the place of religious life and spiritual experience. In fact, the terms "heart" and "affections", often become closely connected.

### **Spiritual authors of the Eastern Church**

Spiritual authors of the Christian East consider the heart as the "seat of the Spirit". They speak of custody, attention, purity, thoughts and the desires of the heart. Pavel Petrovich Ivanov<sup>1</sup> in his pamphlet, *Peace in Christ*<sup>2</sup>, writes: "To seek nourishment for the heart is to turn to God, because God himself is an all-embracing heart. It is only with the heart that one can know the secrets of the universe. It is the heart that perceives God. Only the heart is capable of giving peace to the spirit." "A person 'without heart' is one without love and religion, because at the end of the day atheism is that state [of being] without a heart".<sup>3</sup>

The heart's function "consists in experiencing everything that touches our person. Thus, the heart unceasingly experiences the state of the soul and body, as well as multiform aspects of our spiritual actions, objects encountered, external situations and, in a general way, our entire course of life".<sup>4</sup>

Sometimes it is said the heart leads one to being irrational, but – as some of the Fathers affirm – the Lord ordered the faithful to go to their private room, and this chamber in

which to pray is the heart. Prayer will never be perfect if it does not descend "from the head to heart": "Prayer is, in its truest sense, a sighing of the heart towards God. If this is lacking, there is no prayer."<sup>5</sup> It is the natural breathing of the heart that spontaneously aspires to union with God and with a natural intuition feels the presence of the Holy Spirit in everything a person does, thinks and desires. Such a prayer is the awareness of our status as children of God, of our divinization to the extent that it is possible to feel and taste the Spirit's presence in this life.

The heart is as mysterious as God and totally accessible only to God, just as the prophet Jeremiah writes: "The human heart is more devious than anything ... Who can understand it? I, the Lord, explore the mind and test the heart." (Jer 17:9-10).

### **Mysticism of the heart**

If the heart is the vital protagonist of all activity, it will be the principle of unity of the human person and is an indicator of integrity. The heart maintains the energy of all the forces of the soul and body. "Therefore, the formation of the heart has great importance from the beginning of the spiritual life"<sup>6</sup>.

The most important and primordial work in the spiritual life is "the art of governing the movements of the heart", which the Fathers call attention, sobriety, internal activity.

Such attention consists in turning away from evil thoughts which come from the outside. Rejoice in what is within in order to lead the heavenly life in conversation with God. Be attentive to the feelings of the heart that prepare the way for contemplation. It is in the heart that the faithful see God. Then the heart becomes a source of revelation. If all the strength of the spirit is concentrated there, the faithful are dazzled by spiritual splendor, contemplating the Lord in their hearts.

"The feelings of the soul are the feelings of the heart arising as a consequence of the changes produced in the soul, by its own operation. They become distinguished as theoretical, practical and aesthetic feelings, and thus come from understanding, from the will, or are a consequence of the reflection of the heart on itself, of its return to its own richness"<sup>7</sup>.

### **The heart as spiritual measure**

Spiritual progress is manifested in the constancy of the heart's goodness. Heavenly realities cannot be 'felt' with the heart. Thus, the final victory over sin is earned only when one develops an aversion to temptation, becoming insensitive to worldly attractions and acquiring a taste only for the divine.

In this life, divine grace is present from the beginning as one substance with the soul, often making itself felt as consolation, as a reward for early efforts. Later, God often hides and leaves saints in suffering, in desolation, to purify them. Then eventually, when

purification is complete, he again grants his consolations and the fullness of the Holy Spirit in which one experiences warmth, peace, joy, and tears.

- <sup>1</sup> Pavel Petrovich Ivanov, a Russian historian who dealt mainly with Central Asian history in the XVI-XIX centuries, was born in Siberia in 1893 and died in Leningrad in 1942. He wrote numerous studies and translations of Persian and Turkish sources and was a friend of Russian poet and philosopher, Vyacheslav Ivanovich Ivanov, who lived in Rome from 1924 to 1949.
- <sup>2</sup> P. Petrovich Ivanov, *Smirenie vo Khristiē*, Paris 1925, p. 97.
- <sup>3</sup> Quoted according to V. Serdce, *The Heart in Christian and Indian Mysticism*, in Centro Aletti (ed.), *The spiritual intelligence of feeling*, Ed. Lipa, Rome 1995, p. 25.
- <sup>4</sup> P. Petrovich Ivanov, *Čto est' duhovnaja žizn'*, Moskva 1897, cit. *ibid.*, p. 26.
- <sup>5</sup> Id. *Collection of letters*, Moskva 1898, t. I, cit. *ibid.*, p. 205.
- <sup>6</sup> Id. *Put' ko spaseniju*, Moskva 1908, cit. *ibid.*, p. 238.