MSC SPIRITUALITY OF THE HEART IN AUSTRALIA TODAY

A Young MSC's Perspective

KHOI DOAN NGUYEN MSC

The idea of writing this article was initiated by the search for some answers for a paradoxical question we, the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart (MSCs), are facing: If our spirituality, the MSC spirituality of the heart, is still relevant in today's context of Australia, then why do young people not respond to us? Why have we not attracted more vocations? I have puzzled over this question for some years. I joined the MSCs five years ago and still feel fascinated and energized by this spirituality. How come other young guys, like myself, have not found this themselves?

This article is not an attempt to respond to this question, but it is about acknowledging and examining the relevance, appropriateness and place of the MSC heart spirituality in Australian spirituality today.

Firstly, I will examine the appropriateness and preference for the term 'spirituality of the heart' to that of 'devotion to the Sacred Heart', which might be still attractive to some, in the context of the contemporary Australian spirituality.

Secondly, I will assess Australian spirituality today—its defining factors and the growing interest in spirituality outside of religions, or eclectic spirituality—particularly among young people—in facing a complex and uncertain world. Thirdly, I am going to review the MSC heart spirituality in the Australian context I have examined and assess the connection of this spirituality with the larger spiritual realm of Australian society and of the universal Church, exemplified by Pope Francis. Even though not trying to answer the paradoxical question about the shortage of vocations and the relevance of our spirituality to youth, in some instances, I still want to pay some attention on what youth spirituality is about and how the heart spirituality is fitting with what they are looking for.

Why 'Spirituality', no Longer 'Devotion'?

In my last article published in Compass (Spring Issue 2014)—“MSC Spirituality of the Heart in Vietnam”—I endeavoured to explore what the MSC heart spirituality means and is for the contemporary Vietnamese culture. However, the term 'spirituality' has been taken for granted because of its use and popularity. This time I would like to start this article by looking at this issue.

Another reason I would like to talk about why we accept the term 'a spirituality of the heart'—as E. J. Cuskelly authored it—is because there has been a nostalgia of the term 'devotion to the Sacred Heart' when talking about the expression of our MSC charism. There have been a number of constructive and honest comments about the abstractness and distance of the term 'spirituality'; while 'devotion' means something much more practical and concrete, something that even some of the young, devout Catholics nowadays still look for. So why 'a spirituality of the heart', but no longer 'devotion to the Sacred Heart'?

Regis A. Duffy, in the HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism, defines 'devotion' as a non-liturgical prayer form that promotes an affective (and sometimes
individualistic) attitude of faith; and this form of prayer emerged among the laity who could not understand and participate (much) in the liturgy, especially the Eucharist. And the devotion to the Sacred Heart was among the most popular devotions prior to Vatican II along with the Miraculous Medal novena, devotions to the Sorrowful Mother, Stations of the Cross, and the Rosary.

Devotion, Duffy continues, can be best understood as personal piety or 'popular religion'. It is called 'popular' because it makes sense even to the illiterate faithful since it concretizes some of the fundamental aspects of the faith—repentance, conversion, etc.—and stimulates some popular prayer expressions—reciting novenas, saying the rosary or making a pilgrimage. This was a form of spirituality of the day and it responded to the needs of the time. When we talk about spirituality, it is inclusive of devotions.

For example, when describing the characteristics of Catholic spirituality in Australia from 1788 to the end of World War I, Peter Malone, the coordinator and editor of the two books consisting of collective reflections and articles from a variety of Australian authors and writers on Australian Theology, writes:

Highlighting the expressions of the faith [Irish spirituality] in its time (without the benefit of critical hindsight). What emerges is a strong focus on the parish church, the priest, Mass, devotions and devotional helps; God as personal, a part of daily life as well as harsher interpretations, even a 'hard God'; sense of duty, loyalty, self-dedication and pride sustained through hardships by hope of the faith.

So devotional practices were part of Catholic spirituality in Australia during this time.

Furthermore, Dennis Murphy, in his book The Heart of the Word Incarnate, suggests that 'devotion' actually means 'religion taken to heart'. It seems to me that in reviving the appropriateness and relevance of the devotion to the Sacred Heart, Murphy tends to renew the concept of what a devotion means and wants to bring this concept even further into the realm of spirituality, a much broader concept which, as said before, includes devotional forms. He suggests that the devotion to the Sacred Heart 'belongs to the Berullian tradition of spirituality', the context in which Fr Jules Chevalier saw this devotion.

This is to illustrate the point being made: devotion is an expression of spirituality of the day.

Therefore, one can understand why devotion is still attractive to a number of people—those who have a spirituality in which devotions are still relevant and even necessary, those who come from other countries or places where devotional practices are still present and popular, like Vietnam and some other Asian countries, and some of the young, more traditional Catholics look back with nostalgia to the pre-Vatican Church, a more institutional, traditional and formal Church.

Perhaps I agree with Murphy that we should not simplify either 'devotion' or 'spirituality' in order to disregard one or the other. Both have their own beauty and appropriateness to different people and circumstances. However, while it is appropriate to understand the connection of spirituality and devotion as I have been trying to do in this section, at the same time I think it is even more important to be aware of a nostalgia for a form of spiritual expression that is no longer congruent to the signs of our time and context.
The Australian Spirituality Today

Before starting to write this article, I desired that this article would be written by a number of us MSC seminarians, as a collective work and reflection of the younger MSCs in Australia. I wanted us all to examine broadly and carefully Australian spirituality and its context. I had an intuition that Australian spirituality and its context is a very broad and complex topic that it is very difficult (even impossible) for one person to do.

Therefore, in this article, I am not (and am not able) to examine Australian spirituality exhaustively and in detail, but I shall sweep through some of the important aspects of contemporary spirituality in this country. Just to demonstrate how complicated Australian spirituality is, I would like to quote from David Tacey as he describes the factors that give form and shape to a new spirituality in this country arising out of its changing social, political and economic circumstances, and its technological and scientific developments:

Broadly, the areas that appear to be giving rise to a new spirituality in Australia include the experience of nature and landscape, the environmental emergency, Aboriginal reconciliation, the visual arts, popular life-history and story-telling, biography, autobiography, public interest in Eastern religions, contemporary youth culture, progressives in the churches, the therapeutic and mental health professions, workplace relations, human resources and industry leadership, social analysis, the natural health movement and the re-enchantment of gardens and herbs, the popular men's movement, the spiritual women's movement, and a kind of generalized hunger for personal and cultural renewal.11

More can be added to the list. Since World War II, Australia has experienced a shift from England to America in the political arena, shown in the Second World War and our current military and political alliance with America. Also since that time, Australia has experienced an influx of migrants from Europe (1945-1975), from Asia (after the fall of Saigon in 1975) and other parts of the globe.12 This means that Australian society has become more multi-cultural and the Australian church a more multi-cultural church. Other perspectives added to the current spirituality are ecumenism, interreligious dialogue, ethical issues (especially in bioethics), the issue of governance (management and administration in the Institutions), and the issue of child sexual abuse.

In the midst of all these, there is an undeniable phenomenon emerging: the growth of interest in spirituality among people of all kinds of religion, non-religion, tradition, culture, career, social background, academic discipline and age—particularly among young people.13 Within the culture of diversity, Peter Malone rightly observes: ‘. . . we need to explore where, when and how the established religion broke into diversity and we began to speak more of spirituality.’14

However, the question is: what kind of spirituality are we talking about here? I once heard one of my lecturers suggesting spirituality as 'faith seeking expression' (based on the classic definition of theology: 'faith seeking understanding—St Anselm). You probably have heard this before. However, a spirituality we see popular among people today may not be a spirituality initiated by 'the faith' in its strict sense. Spirituality today can be a 'horizontal' spirituality15 or secularized spirituality, where God is not the necessary starting point of a spiritual journey. The starting point of this growing interest in spirituality for many people today is one's own lived experience and reality. Rufus Black suggests that 'the resources of Christian spirituality have been too narrowly focused on the quest for God rather than on the quest for a fulfilled human life, of which the quest of God is only one part.'16 This leads to the fact that Christians have been lacking in resources to help and guide people on the search for meaning in everyday happenings and their personal fulfilment. This also means that what
people are looking for today is not God, the Other, but themselves and the meaning of their existence.

However, is this not the purpose of God for humanity, the purpose of Jesus coming into our world? The first command of God to creation and humanity is: 'Be fruitful and multiply' (Gen 1:22, 28). And Jesus says: 'I came that they [the sheep] may have life, and have it abundantly' (Jn 10:10). The search for our true self, if it is true itself, will inevitably lead to and be inclusive of the search for God.

People nowadays are looking for the spiritual (when they get disillusioned and disappointed at the limitation of the material), but perhaps not the spiritual of the Church with doctrinal form and content which do not relate directly to their everyday life experience. David Tacey suggests that the problems of our Church today are the problems of language and representation. The language is disconnected from the education system based on experience and experimentation—scientific methodology. And the representation of the Church's faith is hierarchical, authoritative and static. On the other hand, our young people in schools are being taught to be dialogical, autonomous and creative. We should not be surprised, then, that people are not coming to our churches, especially young Australians.

Apparently, Pope Francis is seeing this very clearly—he claims that the recent Synod of Bishops on the Family (October 2015) was:

...about trying to open up broader horizons, rising above conspiracy theories and blinkered viewpoints, so as to defend and spread the freedom of the children of God, and to transmit the beauty of Christian Newness, at times encrusted in a language which is archaic or simply incomprehensible.

The Church, before the coming of Pope Francis, seemed not to be speaking the language of the day, the language of spirituality. In the complexity of Australian society, spirituality seems to be a way that can move people forward in facing this. It seems to be able to propose positive and relevant approaches to the most challenging issues of this time: the complexity of multicultural and multi-religious society, racism, discrimination, violence, immigration, ecology, integration of Aboriginal culture and people into the wider community, and family life struggles. And it seems to be a response to the youth who are longing for something more than materialism and hedonism in their lives. Tacey, out of his personal experience and reflection on youth spirituality today, writes:

For young adults today, spirituality is no longer a matter of private taste or personal concern. Many of my students talk to me about spirituality in worldly and public terms—as the basis for a new sense of human community, as a cure for racism, as an essential ingredient of the new ecological awareness, as an antidote to domestic violence and civil unrest. Spirituality for youth today has acquired a public conscience, with very little of the antisocial, pleasure-seeking flavor that it had for the university students of my own generation, in the 1960s and 1970s.

So the so-called 'secular' spirituality for our youth today is not merely about self-seeking, self-satisfying and self-centering, but it is more about something else. It is more about reaching out of themselves, finding ways to deal with public and social issues with human meanings, values and integrity. However, these meanings and values are no longer the products of some intellectual exercise or rhetorical method used in education and the institutional Church, but they are the result of real, personal and sophisticated life experiences and a reflection of them.

If spirituality is defined as 'connectedness'—with everything (reality of life and creation) and everyone (self, others, the marginalized in society, the world and the divine)—then the meanings and values youth spirituality brings to Australian spirituality today are the result of reflection on the
COMPASS

questions of experience and connection: What is behind the complication and challenges in my life? How can I cope with these? Is there a connection of all these in my life with those of others around me? If there is, what is it? What does this connection mean? What am I supposed to do about it? How come the older generations seem not to do anything about it?

It is an affirmative sign that our current Pope is stirring enormous energy and enthusiasm in numerous Catholics and non-Catholics, both young and old. He seems to be moving the Church forward in dialoguing and interacting with the world's reality as 'one in it', not as 'one above it', and in speaking the language of the day. Many examples show how he is very up-to-date with today's spirituality in general and with youth spirituality in particular. When just elected as Pope, he clearly marked that he wants—a poor church for the poor'. In his Encyclical Letter Laudato Si', he begins to address the issue of the environmental crisis not from the Judaeo-Christian tradition but:

...by briefly reviewing several aspects of the present ecological crisis, with the aim of drawing on the results of the best scientific research available today, letting them touch us deeply and provide a concrete foundation for the ethical and spiritual itinerary that follows.22

Two things are to be noticed here: first, he starts with the present situation, the reality of environment; second, he includes science in his starting point. Furthermore, as Bruce Duncan suggests, underpinning the encyclical is the 'see, judge, act' methodology, which he used in the conference of the Latin American Bishops at Aparecida in 2007.23 The Pope does not merely want to contribute to the public discussion on the ecological crisis, but he also wants to move the discussion into practical action. Australian youth—and certainly myself—would have found this approach and content of this letter very resonant with their spirituality.

The Synod of Bishops on the Family is also a place where we see how Francis was endeavoring to direct the Church leaders to re-focus, not on the doctrines of the Church (though he knows how important these are), but on the real experience of family in the world. He invited his bishops to look at the situation and to reflect: Okay, if this is what we see, then what are we going to do about it?24 Again, we, young Australians, would be hearing all about this on the media and reading the concluding speech of Francis and seeing how 'real' the Church is for itself and for all of us.

**MSC Heart Spirituality in Australia Today**

In examining carefully the changes in the Church under the leadership of Pope Francis as above, I would like to show how closely connected Francis' spirituality is with the spirituality of Australian youth and many others today. However, in his Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium, Francis seems to be well aware of 'a spirituality without God' as a reaction to a 'materialistic, consumerist and individualistic society', and at the same time he warns that this is also a means of exploiting the weaknesses of people, especially the poor, the marginalized and those looking for immediate, easy solutions to life's complexity.25 Nevertheless, one can easily see how Francis is moving the Church towards spirituality.

Also we can see that our MSC heart spirituality is more than ever relevant, appropriate and attractive to Australians. Heart spirituality is in many ways and to a lot of people more adequate than 'devotion to the Sacred Heart'. Even though written in 1981, I still find E. J. Cuskelley's conviction very relevant today:

I believe that we are specially blest in our days if we have learned to look carefully to the Heart of Christ. A 'spirituality of the heart' is admirably suited to help us (and to help us assist others) through this transition time which all the Church is living. It is centered on the new heart and the Spirit which the prophets saw as
the source of life and the new covenant. When he laid down his life for his friends, when his side was pierced, Christ gave us his Spirit.\textsuperscript{26}

In defining the four journeys of the heart spirituality, notice that Cuskelly does not start with the Heart of Christ—and he did not use the capital ‘H’ in the term ‘a spirituality of the heart’—but he begins with our heart (small ‘h’), with its profound and personal needs for life, love and meaning.\textsuperscript{27} Our spirituality starts from where we are, our experience and our reality. This is the starting point for everyone. This fits our contemporary culture and spirituality. And this fits with what the Pope seems to be doing as well.

Of course, our starting point is not our end point. Our spirituality, our way of life, will have to, through the guidance of the Spirit, lead to the Heart of Jesus where the compassion, kindness and gentleness of the Father is revealed. The core of the MSC charism is the ‘common’ experience of God’s love. Even though this experience of God’s love is very common, we MSCs have a specific focus on this experience. As the working document for preparing for our 2017 General Chapter reminds us, our charism comes from the experience of being loved by God ‘in the Heart of Christ’.\textsuperscript{28} The term ‘in the Heart of Christ’ may seem to be very commonly used words in our spirituality and our everyday language, but they signify the specific way we experience God’s love for us. That is the love of God revealed in kindness, compassion and gentleness,\textsuperscript{29} all manifested through the humanity of Jesus.

This kind, compassionate, gentle and human love of God does not mean ‘tough love’ in which God is perceived as a rough, old father trying to teach his children how to behave. It does not mean ‘testing love’ in which God is presumed to put us to the test in our faith. It also does not mean a ‘judging and righteous love’ which ensures that everything has to be just and fair. Regardless of the fact that these characteristics of the love of God might be good and necessary for some, they are not what our charism is about. Our charism comes from the human love of Jesus and experienced, not between the divine and human, but between human and human, not from the top down, but from the grass roots level (cf. Heb 4:15).\textsuperscript{30} This means that God’s love for us is not a feeling of pity of the superior party for the inferior one, but a real love between two equal parties in which God calls us through Jesus to respond to God’s free and gratuitous love by our free and unconditional love to God through Jesus himself.

The experience of being loved in the Heart of Christ means a very specific thing and leaves out a lot of aspects of love experienced in human life. And the way we experience God’s love is the way we are called to share love with others. This is our mission of love to the world. This is our specific way of being the Heart of God to the world. Once we know and ‘own’ our experience, of humanity and of love through our heart and Jesus’ Heart, then we may accompany others in their own experiences and in their situations just as God does with us.

If we start with human experience, then we can speak freely to Australians, both young and old, who are yearning for spirituality. If we start with human experience, then regardless the fact that we may be speaking in terms of purely horizontal spirituality or secularized spirituality, we should trust that spirituality when mature would lead people back to its ultimate, however often neglected, origin—faith in the divine and the faith community.\textsuperscript{31} If we start with human experience, we will keep ourselves grounded with others and life reality and enhanced with connectedness, where genuine and realistic meanings and values come from. As Tacey says, spirituality today needs the ‘second’ innocence, the innocence that has embraced sophistication but also being naïve enough to be inspired by hope for spiritual truths.\textsuperscript{32} Our heart spirituality is not the first, naïve spirituality of love which yet knows about the challenges, failures and brokenness in love.
But our spirituality is the spirituality of the heart 'pierced on Calvary', of the heart which has been broken open by life's cruelty and human vulnerability. Cuskelly was well aware of this by rightly defining the fourth characteristic of the spirituality of the heart: 'we will not be dis-hearted or discouraged in the face of difficulties.'\(^{33}\)

In the nineteenth century, Fr Jules Chevalier, our Founder, had to face the illnesses of the time: egotism and indifference in the post-Revolution period; and he envisioned the love revealed in the Heart of Christ was the remedy for these. Today, I really think we are facing similar, but not totally the same, sicknesses in the post-secularism and post-materialism time: individualism and relativism.\(^{34}\) An individualistic mentality can lead to personal or narcissistic expression. And being relativistic can help one be dialogical and open-minded to others or can leave one feeling apathetic and deaf to the cries of the poor—as Pope Francis has challenged us when facing the refugee crisis today:

> Has any one of us wept because of this situation and others like it? Has any one of us grieved for the death of these brothers and sisters? Has any one of us wept for these persons who were on the boat? For the young mothers carrying their babies? For these men who were looking for a means of supporting their families? We are a society which has forgotten how to weep, how to experience compassion—'suffering with' others: the globalization of indifference has taken from us the ability to weep!\(^{35}\)

So being individual and relative are not bad in themselves. They only become sicknesses when they lose their balance between self and others, between openness and groundlessness. Our spirituality of the heart includes the person, person in community, openness and a grounded experience of love in Christ.

### Conclusion

In reflecting on the transitioning of the Church from proclaiming faith as a 'contract' with God to inviting people to live out a 'covenant' with God in the 1980s, Cuskelly writes:

> The days have come when the Church has need of religious and priests who live their own personal covenant with God in Christ, and can help others to be a covenant people. This applies to our reflections on the ministry - are we going to get people to make and observe contracts, or are we going to get them to keep covenants?\(^{36}\)

Till now I think the Church, which means all of us, is still going through this transition—however, since the 1980s till now we have done our best to get to where we are. One can observe the resistance of some of the bishops and the happenings in the Synod on Family to see that we still need to put the 'covenant'—relational, dynamic and conversional—language we have used in our canon law and systematic theology into practice and action in pastoral and real life situations of the people.

The MSC spirituality of the heart has a vital place in the life of the Church in Australia today, since it is grounded in human experience in everyday life, the experience of love, the experience of God's love in a specific way that is gentle, kind, compassionate and humane. And this inspires and encourages us into action to change our relationship with self, others, creation and God.

This spirituality is closely connected to Australian spirituality and Francis' spirituality that the rest of the Church is still to catch up with. However, this does not mean that we, the MSCs, can easily attract more young people to join us. Nevertheless, the appropriateness and quality of this heart spirituality should be acknowledged—as many of the MSCs have done over the recent years already—and should not be undervalued because we are attracting fewer vocations.
1. This term is attributed to my reading of Michael Mason, Andrew Singleton, and Ruth Webber, 'The Spirituality of young Australians,' *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 12, no. 2 (August 2007): 149-163, 161.
4. See Ibid.
5. See Ibid.
8. See Ibid., 146-147.
9/ See Peter Malone, ed., *Developing An Australian Theology* (Strathfield, NSW: St Pauls, 1999), 16.
10. See Dennis J. Murphy, *The Heart of the Word Incarnate*, 153. However, what I notice is that Dennis Murphy uses the term 'devotion' and 'spirituality' in the chapter titled 'A Devotion or a Spirituality?' interchangeably and at his discretion. This gives me an impression that he tries to conceptualize devotional practice in the perspective of spirituality. In this case, the language to argue for the relevance of the use of 'the devotion to the Sacred Heart' is quite convincing because it is the language of spirituality, the language of today. However, the defending of the relevance of the devotional language, in my perspective, is not so.
21. Ibid., 15.
24. Francis' Conclusion Remark for the Synod is both a stunning and challenging speech, not only for the Bishops, but also for all of us. See Pope Francis, 'Conclusion of the Synod of Bishops.'
27. Ibid.
29 See The Missionaries of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, *Constitutions and Statutes*, #6, 12.
transcendental desire which would always remind us of our longing for meanings and values from the transcendental point of view.


REFERENCES


