

THE HEART AT THE HEART OF THE WORLD: ECOSPIRITUALITY, REPARATION, AND THE SACRED HEART

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Abstract:

This essay explores a new way of thinking about the theology and spirituality of the Sacred Heart devotion. The essay begins by identifying the danger of global ecological collapse as a crisis that requires us to rethink traditional theologies. After reviewing the history of the Sacred Heart devotion and how it became associated with the theology of reparation, the essay proposes a renewed Christology that discovers the Heart of Jesus truly at the heart of the world—including at the heart of the Earth's physicality and its ecological systems. In this view, the damage humans are inflicting on the whole community of Earth creatures literally pierces the Heart of Jesus. Our embrace of his Heart at the heart of the world will awaken us to a spirituality of reparation as compassionate accompaniment of the suffering Earth and its creatures.

Keywords:

Sacred Heart • Christology • ecospirituality • theology of reparation
• *science and religion*

The environmental damage on Earth has prompted reflection on the spirituality that drives human actions. The following reflections will explore new ways of thinking about the theology and spirituality of the Sacred Heart devotion, which we hope will inspire a different perspective on the earth and creation. This requires a connection between theology and spirituality to reveal different perspectives on the current crisis. We will examine a renewed Christology that finds the Heart of Jesus truly at the heart of the world, including its physical and ecological systems. In this spiritual-theological perspective, the damage that humans have caused to the entire community of Earth's creatures truly pierces the Heart of Jesus. Our embrace of His Heart at the heart of the world will awaken us to a spirituality of healing as a loving accompaniment to the Earth and its suffering creatures, a healing that begins within ourselves and through our relationship with the Earth.

A New Crisis Calls for New Theologies and Spiritualities

Some of the ideas presented here may seem new or even "radical." Yet in Matthew 13:51-52 we read that Jesus told his disciples, "When a teacher of the law has become a learner in the kingdom of heaven, he is like a householder who can produce from his store both the new and the old." Here Jesus reminds us that to belong to his kingdom, we must not only be teachers of the old "tried and true" doctrines. We must also be learners, continually open to discovering fresh dimensions of the deepest truths. Even the most venerable and revered theological expressions that have been handed down to us were, at their origin, fresh and innovative discoveries that responded to the cultural and political crises of a very specific time and place. It is our responsibility, then, not simply to repeat the past but to search for the fresh approaches that will respond to the most urgent needs of our own era.

Since the time of Saint Marguerite Marie Alacoque in seventeenth century France, the Sacred Heart devotion has been closely associated with a theology and practice of reparation. The concept of reparation essentially means that something needs to be done to make up for a wrong or to repair damage that has occurred. In Alacoque's seventeenth century

France, “wrong” was most often defined as behaving dishonorably to a highly ranked person, or to God. Reparation required a costly, painful and humiliating confession through which the wrongdoer publicly reaffirmed the status and honor of the wronged Lord, whether human or divine. The spirituality that flowed from this understanding tended to emphasize penance and voluntary suffering as the way to make reparations to a wrathful God. To a large degree, this image of God and this kind of spirituality are no longer attractive to the people of today’s world. For this reason, many regard the devotion to the Sacred Heart – and the theology of reparation -- as hopelessly outdated.

Yet there are other ways to think about reparation. For example, in the United States today, the same word “reparation” is being used in a very different context. In this case, the “wrong” is the historical enslavement of African American persons during the early centuries of US history, and the proposed reparation is monetary payments to their descendants to make up for the damage done. The difference between these two examples shows that the meaning of reparation depends on the larger historical, social, and political context in which it is being proposed. Thus, it is possible to retain the essential concept of reparation while significantly reconfiguring its content. It is time for us to take a new look at the Heart of Christ, asking what we need to learn today in order to express its reparative power in a way that corresponds to the specific crises that characterize our own time.

The Signature Crisis of Our Time

In my view, the most profound “wrong” that absolutely must be faced by humanity today is that of impending planet-wide ecological catastrophe. Many aspects of the day-to-day reality of life in my home country of the United States may be quite different from the day-to-day reality experienced in Indonesia, yet what we have in common is that we are all interdependent inhabitants of the same threatened planet. Beginning with the industrial revolution (in the West, around 1800) and then accelerating exponentially starting around 1950, the rates of habitat destruction, fossil fuel burning, and chemical and plastic pollution have gone up far beyond the ability of Earth’s ecosystems to accommodate. At the same time, human population has exploded to over 8 billion people – which is more

than three times as many as when I was born in 1950! As we all know, many kinds of disasters are occurring as a result of this extreme pressure upon the natural environment. The increasing frequency and intensity of fires, floods, landslides, cyclones, crop failures, species extinction, and pollution-related illnesses are only some of the ever-growing list of tragedies that are affecting all living beings on Earth.

All scientific evidence points to the overwhelming stress that is being put on all the life systems of the planet. About fifty years ago environmentalist James Lovelock proposed “Gaia theory,” which is the idea that all life on Earth functions as one system that self-regulates to maintain its own temperature and chemical balances.² Lovelock thus compared the Earth to a living organism. Not all scientists accepted this characterization, but the fundamental science of the Earth as a self-regulating body is sound. What is happening now, however, is that the Earth cannot maintain its balance. Its ability to regulate temperature, chemical balances, and circulation patterns has been lost. The entire system of life on Earth is cascading into deeply stressed conditions. There is imminent danger that it may soon lose its capacity to be a habitat that supports human life.

As a result, every human being on Earth, and indeed every living being on Earth, is facing deep ecological trauma. Trauma can be defined as an overwhelmingly destructive stress that shatters one’s ability to cope. Too often, this breakdown of coping ability is long-lasting or even permanent, continuing long after the initial traumatic experience. For many people ecological trauma is already occurring as their homes, livelihoods, loved ones, and/or reproductive capability are destroyed by the direct impact of climate, habitat, and pollution tragedies. For others among us who at this time appear to be less directly affected, the anxiety and grief of watching beloved places and creatures sicken and die engenders deep sadness. Increasingly, young people in many parts of the world are experiencing profound anxiety and despair because they foresee their inevitable fate as life under conditions of complete ecological collapse accompanied by social chaos.

Certainly, just about every human society throughout the ages has experienced occasional disasters, sometimes very devastating ones. Yet the traumatic crisis that humanity faces today is truly different for two reasons.

First, it is global and all-encompassing – which means there is no refuge where humans or other species can escape to abide until the crisis passes. Second, at root this crisis is the result of human actions. Of course, humans do not directly or intentionally cause a cyclone to take place, but collective human actions over many years of burning fossil fuels cause its intensity to multiply to vastly more destructive levels. This is why many geologists are saying that the Cenozoic geological era, which lasted 63 million years (from the time of the dinosaurs until about 1950), is ending and being replaced by the Anthropocene era – a time when all geological processes are directly influenced by human activity. The unprecedented character of this global ecological crisis demands that we, as theologians and pastoral leaders, recalibrate our theologies and our spiritualities in order to respond to the new reality that faces us.

The Potential of Sacred Heart Spirituality

There are two reasons why I think a renewal of Sacred Heart spirituality has special potential in the face of this global crisis. The first is that the spiritual root of the global ecological crisis is the alienation of human persons from the living community of Earth creatures. Increasingly in the modern period, humans have taken the attitude that we humans are somehow so distinct from the rest of life on Earth that we can use and abuse all the others in any way that pleases us. However, in fact, we are so intricately and intimately interlinked with the community of life on Earth that its distress rebounds immediately upon us, weakening us, making us ill, and ultimately threatening our very existence. A refreshed image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus as quite literally “the Heart at the heart of the world” identifies the true shared life and intimacy that God intends among God, humanity, and all Earth creatures. In the Incarnation, God reveals heart-love and the intention of salvation for humans within the entire community of Earth life, not for humans separated from that community.

The second reason that I see such potential in Sacred Heart spirituality is that in a time when trauma is such a central and increasing feature of life on Earth, the Heart of Christ is an image of tender, saving accompaniment. Experts on trauma assert that the single most significant factor in whether people can survive traumatic events without being completely shattered

by them is their experience of being tenderly accompanied. People whose earliest years were characterized by the gentle, non-judgmental accompaniment of parental caregivers have much more built-in resilience in the face of trauma. For any person, however, regardless of childhood experience, genuinely compassionate accompaniment makes a vast difference in the ability to endure even the worst kinds of pain and loss. The Sacred Heart represents God's desire to accompany us in the most intimate dimensions of our humanity. As the Heart at the heart of the world, it also represents God's tender, attentive accompaniment of the entire Earth community of living beings.

The Pierced Heart of Jesus: An Historical Overview

In order to develop this renewed theology and spirituality on a solid basis of "treasures both old and new," we must first study in some depth the history of the devotion to the Sacred Heart. There we will discover both why the Sacred Heart is so closely associated with the theology of reparation, and why a renewal is so much needed in our time.

Bible and Patristics

The core biblical text for Christian devotion to Jesus's heart is John 19:34, which recounts that while Jesus hung on the cross, "one of the soldiers stabbed his side with a lance, and at once there was a flow of blood and water." The implication, although not stated in so many words, is that the lance pierced Jesus's physical heart, which is the source of the fount of blood and water. This text recalls Zechariah 12:10, "They will look on the one whom they have pierced." Nearby in Zechariah 13:1 we also note the line: "On that day a fountain will be opened for the house of David and for the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to purify from sin and uncleanness." Another text that was quickly brought into the same orbit of reflection was John 7:38, "Rivers of living water shall flow from within him." The Greek word that is used in this text for "within" is *koilias*. Its literal meaning is abdomen or belly, but a good figurative translation would be "heart." As witnessed also by 1 John 5:6-8, the Ephesian tradition of John the Evangelist equates the blood and water pouring from Jesus's

wounded side with the Spirit that is poured out on the Church through the pierced Heart of Jesus on the cross.³ Thus from the beginning, this story of the piercing of Jesus's heart on the cross was considered central not only for devotional practice, but for the entire theology of our redemption.

Patristic theologians quickly expanded upon these images using the allegorical methods of their time. Irenaeus (130-202) called the Church "the fountain of the living water that flows to us from the Heart of Christ," and asserted that a person "who has no part in this Spirit will receive no nourishment or life at the breast of our mother Church."⁴ Origen (185-253) and others drew connections with additional biblical texts, such as the rock that Moses struck to bring forth water in the desert (Exodus 17:6; Numbers 20:11) and the holy city where God dwells and a river of life-giving water flows forth to rejuvenate the Earth (Revelation 22:1). Tertullian (155-220) initiated a tradition of seeing the water as symbolizing the sacrament of baptism, and the blood the sacrament of the Eucharist.

In the fourth and fifth centuries, other authors wove connections to yet more scripture passages. Ambrose (340-397) wrote of Jesus as the grape-laden vine (John 15), pierced so that the living water will flow forth on our behalf. Augustine (354-430) also added a meditation on the story of John leaning on Jesus's breast at the last supper (John 13:25), asserting that it was because John drank from the breast of Jesus that he could give us to drink through his gospel. Peter Chrysologus (406-450) reflected on Thomas putting his hand into Jesus' side, touching the wounds that pour forth faith upon the whole world (John 20:24-29).⁵ Drawing on Paul's theology of Christ as the second Adam (1 Corinthians 15:45-49), another set of writers contemplated the Church being born from the opening in Christ's side as Eve had been born from the opened side of Adam. The Heart was then interpreted as a maternal womb, bearing and giving birth to the Church through Christ's wounded side.

Through the focus on the pierced heart, all these early reflections emphasize Jesus's physical humanity, bleeding and dying on the cross, as the divine source of the church, faith, sacraments, and all the fruits of the outpoured Spirit. This is the ultimate meaning of reparation: Jesus's participation in the earthly condition of being wounded and dying opens the way to fullness of life for all. We will return to this when as we develop our renewed Christology of the "Heart at the heart of the world."

Medieval Mystics and Nuptial Symbolism

The great mystical traditions of the Sacred Heart developed in the medieval monasteries. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), who founded the Benedictine reform known as the Cistercians, is noted for boldly claiming the affective intensity of his love for the human Christ. Reading the love story of the Song of Songs, he wrote movingly of Christ's tender love and exclaimed: "The secret of his Heart lies visible through the cleft of his Body; visible too the great mystery of his love, and the bowels of his mercy."⁶ Bernard, as well as other medieval male clerics who wrote on this theme, generally did not speak directly of their personal experience of the Heart, whether they had such experience or not. Instead, they expressed their devotion by eloquently weaving together meditations on scripture texts. It is with the female Cistercian Lutgarde of Aywières (1182-1246) that devotion to the Heart departed from these confines to become a living exchange.

Lutgarde was about to become the fiancée of a young man when Christ appeared to her, opened his chest, and told her to seek only pure love. After she entered the monastery, he invited her to exchange hearts with him, thus initiating a tradition in which a number of subsequent devotees of the Heart would participate. It may have been reflection on Ezekiel 36:26, where God promises "a new heart and a new spirit," that inspired this experience, in which Jesus removed Lutgarde's human heart and replaced it with his own. On another occasion, Christ appeared to her covered with blood on the cross. He detached one arm from the cross, embraced her against his right side, and applied her mouth to his wound so that she could drink from it. Although drinking from the Heart of Christ had been alluded to by earlier writers, it is only with Lutgarde that it begins to be portrayed as an embodied experience of the utmost intimacy.

Like Lutgarde, Gertrude of Helfta (1256-1302) found herself invited to exchange her heart with that of Jesus. On one occasion she saw the Lord extending his Heart to her, then drawing it in with her inside it so that she entered fully into Him. Later, she asserted that the five wounds of Christ were mystically inscribed on her own heart. She also received the transpiercing of her heart by a "ray of light flowing from the divine wound ... drawing to himself all my desires in an unspeakable sweetness."⁷

Many other female mystics of this period shared in similar experiences. Catherine of Siena (1347-1380) is another who experienced the exchange of hearts. Meditating on John 20:27-28, the story of Thomas being invited to put his hand into the wound in Jesus's side, she recounted graphic experiences of being drawn into the wound in Jesus's side and blissfully embraced within his heart. She taught that we nurse at the breast of charity, which is the heart of Christ crucified, but that "we cannot drink from the heart of Christ unless we are willing also to drink from the wounds of our neighbors! And when we do, we ourselves become sources of that same nourishment for others."⁸

In the experiences of these and other female mystics, a tradition of "nuptial mysticism" emerged. This tradition envisioned Jesus and his devotee engaged in a spousal relationship that culminates in spiritual marriage and ecstatic experiences of union. This nuptial imagery, which was sometimes quite explicitly erotic, expresses the longing of the whole, heartfelt person to participate fully in mutually loving relationships. While this tradition places a strong premium on such stories of fulfillment and delight, it typically also places an equally strong premium on graphic participation in the sufferings of Christ. Thus, devotion to the heart of Christ and to his wounds have long been profoundly intertwined, and more often than not invested with an intense erotic charge as well. During the medieval period, these aspects of Heart devotion developed to a peak of affective intensity.

Marguerite Marie Alacoque and Juridical Reparation

In seventeenth century France devotion to the Heart of Jesus gained widespread popularity among the laity, especially thanks to its promotion by St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622) and St. Jean Eudes (1601-1680). Best known, however, is the form of devotion developed by the French Visitation nun Marguerite Marie Alacoque (1647-1690). She had a troubled childhood that included very difficult relationships with relatives, serious problems with eating, a tendency to go to extremes with corporal mortification, and several health crises. As a nun, she was exposed to the teachings of Francis de Sales as well as to the traditions of nuptial mysticism, especially that of Gertrude of Helfta.

Between 1573 and 1575, Marguerite Marie experienced a number of visions in which Jesus showed her his Heart as a blazing furnace of love for human beings. Jesus told her that his Heart is deeply wounded, however, by human indifference, and especially that of those who have been chosen and consecrated to adore God. He announced to Marguerite that the Sacred Heart had especially chosen her to reveal the secret of his love and to transmit it to the entire world. Those who welcome this message will console him and repair the offenses of others. Very specifically, the visions asked her to spend an hour with him in Gethsemane on Thursday evenings and to receive communion on First Fridays. Marguerite's early presentation of the devotion clearly presents these practices as acts of the most intimate personal love. An analysis by Bruno Farinelli finds that at this stage, Marguerite's main image of Jesus is as her "Spouse."⁹ Thus, the original character of her devotion to the Sacred Heart is in continuity with the medieval traditions of nuptial mysticism.

Marguerite's community and spiritual advisors initially did not believe in the authenticity of her visions. The arrival of Claude la Colombière (1641-1682) as superior of the Jesuit community in Paray, however, changed her fate. The two felt an immediate rapport, and he quickly joined her in believing in and promoting the content of her visions. From then on this form of devotion to the Sacred Heart was closely allied with the Jesuits, who helped to spread it around the world. The connection with la Colombière and the Jesuits also led to a major evolution in the character of the devotion. Especially after la Colombière returned from an assignment in England where he was imprisoned and physically abused by the opponents of the French monarchy, he encouraged Marguerite increasingly to situate her devotion within the context of the political struggles of the French king. As part of this evolution, her primary image for Jesus changed from "spouse" to the more authority-based images of "Master" and "Sovereign."¹⁰ She began to present Jesus, the divine sovereign, as so closely allied with the French king that dishonor to the political sovereign intrinsically overflows into dishonor to the divine Sovereign.

This is the context within which Marguerite's Jesuit mentors assisted her in linking her devotion to the theology of reparation. Their concept of reparation was drawn from the juridical language of the time, which

asserted that if a person subject to a high-ranking person such as a king failed to give him the honor that he was due, that person was required to make public and humiliating acts of reparation. The Jesuit theologians saw the divine Sovereign as angry because rebellious human beings have not treated Him with appropriate honor. In this view, the revelation of the Sacred Heart was a final attempt to give people the chance to make reparation for these offenses. The Sacred Heart's demand for the acts of Holy Hour, First Fridays, and the institution of a universal Feast of the Sacred Heart were placed in this context. They were seen as ritualized juridical acts that, because they are costly and humiliating for the sinner, restore God's honor.¹¹ Thus, Marguerite's original nuptial framework for the devotion was largely replaced by a juridical one. It also became associated with a heavy emphasis on voluntary penitential suffering as a way to repair the damage of sin.

Thus we can see that the juridical and political imagery of devotion to the Sacred Heart, and its connection to penitential reparation, developed in a very specific time and place, namely, late seventeenth century France. Of course, the imagery and practices continued to evolve in various contexts over the following two and a half centuries. It is clearly time, however, for a new look at this whole complex of ideas and images. The foundation for doing this will be the development of an ecologically-informed Christology.

A Christology of “the Heart at the Heart of the World”

The Christology of each era must be faithful to scripture and tradition, but it also must make sense within the sciences and philosophies of that era. Within the last hundred years, several scientific developments have taken place that radically change our understanding of the place of humanity and the Earth in the cosmos. Among the most important of these are the discovery of the vastness of time and space; the affirmation of evolution as the origin of species; and burgeoning ecological awareness of the exquisitely intricate interconnections among all Earth creatures and systems.

The Bible and the long centuries when Christian doctrinal traditions were being shaped all shared in the common assumption that the Earth

was the center of the universe and that creation was perhaps six to ten thousand years old. It was only in the twentieth century that new technologies revealed the true stunning vastness and age of the universe. The realization that in the scope of the cosmos our Earth is tinier than a speck of dust is deeply humbling. Scientists now estimate the age of the universe at 13.2 billion years, with the Earth being about 4.6 billion years old. Our species, *homo sapiens*, has existed for at most 300,000 years. These facts alone require rethinking our Christology. How can our Jesus, born a human being on this little planet Earth, be the Lord of a universe that is at least 93 billion light years large and probably much more? How does his short human lifetime of 33 years relate to the billions of years of the Earth's existence, let alone the even greater age of the universe?

A second assumption of the Bible, also maintained through the medieval period and beyond, was that God created each living species in the form that we presently see it. The nineteenth century discovery that species evolve from other species required completely rethinking how God creates. No longer can we imagine the form of a species envisioned first in the mind of God and then manifested in matter. Rather than creating instantly, God works over long periods of time in and with a vast array of natural causes, including chance. In addition, the realization that all life on Earth has actually evolved in one single branching bush from the earliest microscopic forms that emerged four billion years ago radically changes our understanding of ourselves. *Homo sapiens* is a humble, late-arriving member of a sprawling family of billions of species (most of them already extinct) who are all genetically related to one another. To call other species our "kin" is not a metaphor – it is scientific fact! In view of this, is it still possible to say that Jesus came only to save human beings?

A third, related discovery of modern science is the ecological principle that the life of every creature depends completely upon its participation in an intricate web of relationships with hundreds, thousands, or even millions of other creatures, as well as upon the presence of specific habitat factors such as light, water, minerals, available materials, terrain, etc. While ancient peoples certainly marveled at the beauty and wonders of nature, they did not have the in-depth knowledge of chemistry, morphology, geology, paleontology, and so on that enables the realization of how finely tuned, interwoven, and dynamic are all life processes. For Christology,

this means that we must take a fresh look at the implications of the foundational claim that Jesus was fully human. As an embodied human being, he was just as dependent on, and interwoven with, myriads of creatures and processes as any other embodied creature. Jesus's humanity, like that of any human being, cannot be seen as enclosed only within the skin of his single historical body.

Taking these scientific discoveries into account, theologians have been developing a new approach to Christology called "deep incarnation."¹² The essential insight of this approach is that since a human body necessarily both takes in and expels air, water, and foodstuff, all of which both come from and return to the vast global cycles by which air, water, soil, and nutrients circulate continually, Jesus's physical participation in these cycles means that the incarnation in a certain way includes the whole planet – and, beyond that, even the stars and cosmic expanses from which Earth's matter originally derives. In other words, Jesus's human embodiment, like any creature's embodiment, didn't really end at his skin surface – a surface which, by the way, sheds half a million cells every day, sending them to join the dust and soil around one! The original proponent of the deep incarnation approach, Lutheran theologian Neils Henrik Gregersen, summed it up: "My proposal is that the divine Logos (which can be translated as the creative 'Word' or the formative 'Pattern') has assumed not merely humanity, but the *whole malleable matrix of materiality*."¹³

Australian Catholic theologian Denis Edwards also embraced this approach. This is his summary of its implications:

"In the Word made flesh, God is revealed at the heart of the human, and therefore at the heart of all life on Earth. The flesh of Jesus is part of the whole creaturely pattern of life on Earth. When the Word is made flesh, God embraces the long, interconnected history of life in all its complexity and diversity. The incarnation is God-with-us in the 'very tissue' of biological life."¹⁴

The theology of deep incarnation affirms that when the evangelist John wrote that "The Word became flesh" (John 1:14), he implicated the entire cosmos in Jesus's embodiment. Still, Jesus's flesh is not only physical "stuff"; rather, it is the human embodiment of a divine person. This is the basis upon which we can truly say that Christ is "the Heart at the

heart of the world.” His human heart is not only the organ that beat in a historical man’s chest, but the physical expression of a divine love that permeates every smallest and largest bit of creation.

This Christology of “the Heart at the heart of the world” offers a way to answer the questions we raised as we looked at how the modern scientific worldview requires a new look at Christology.¹⁵ By clarifying Jesus’s physical interconnection with global and cosmic processes, we can affirm the significance of the incarnation for the entire universe, not only for our tiny Earth. By recognizing his implicit participation as a member of the human species in the chains of evolution that interconnect all earthly species, we can affirm that the salvation he brings is not limited only to the human species but in some way includes all our earth-creature kin. Finally, as we marvel at the astonishing intricacy of the interconnected web of all creatures and beings, we can welcome the communications of the Heart of Christ as they manifest in the most surprising and delightful ways as we ourselves participate in that web.

An Ecospiritual Practice of Reparation

Now we can look more concretely at what a renewed Sacred Heart devotion and practice of reparation may look like when it derives from a Christology of the Heart at the heart of the world. We recall that the founding biblical image of devotion to the Heart of Christ is that of Jesus on the cross, his heart fatally pierced by the soldier’s lance, with blood and water flowing forth. The blood and water are understood to be symbols of the new life flowing from the redeeming death of Jesus. In the new Christology of the Heart at the heart of the world, the heart that is pierced is not only that of the historical Jesus, but that of the whole physical cosmos and of each wounded sentient being. Thinking about wounding and death in cosmic terms may be too much for us, but we live in a time when the wounding and death of our Earth and its life systems are all too real. The image of the pierced heart mirrors the devastation, death, and grief that we encounter over and over again as ecological catastrophes multiply.

The “wrong” that needs reparation is the traumatic piercing of the heart of Christ in all its dimensions. He is Intimately wounded because of his bodily identification not only with all suffering human beings, but also with the devastated creatures and ecosystems of planet Earth. This is not a question of dishonor, but of actual physical, psychological, and spiritual harm. As noted earlier in this essay, psychologists assert that the single most healing factor for traumatized persons is compassionate, non-judgmental accompaniment. In his heartfelt identification with all persons and creatures who are suffering, Jesus compassionately accompanies us toward healing. Our best act of reparation, then, is to join in that practice of compassionate accompaniment – not only with our loving attentiveness to him in worship and prayer, but also in our presence, love, and care for all wounded beings and ecosystems.

This means accepting that our hearts, too, will be pierced. Too often we want to hide our faces from the death and destruction occurring all around us. As the medieval women mystics learned, deep sorrow and deep joy dwell together in the pierced heart. Their nuptial mysticism taught us that this is the nature of love which compels one to enter completely into the pain of the other. Douglas Christie has written about how crucial it is, both for ourselves and for the future health of life on our planet, that we consciously reclaim the practice of mourning for our kin in the web of life. We naturally mourn when our kin -- someone to whom we are closely related -- suffers or dies. When we hide from the suffering and death of our ecosystemic kin, what we are really hiding from is our own vulnerability within the web of relations that constitutes us. Christie writes:¹⁶

“The ability to mourn for the loss of other species is . . . an expression of our sense of participation in and responsibility for the whole fabric of life of which we are a part. Understood in this way, grief and mourning can be seen not simply as an expression of private and personal loss, but as part of a restorative spiritual practice that can rekindle an awareness of the bonds that connect all life-forms to one another and to the larger ecological whole.”

For help in relearning how to mourn, Christie calls upon the ancient desert tradition of *penthos* (Greek for compunction) and the accompanying

gift of tears. The desert writers assert that when the heart is pierced by sorrow at the devastation sin has wrought, the ‘blood and water’ of tears flows forth. The desert monks wrote about these tears as a painful, frightening, yet also joyful awakening of an intense awareness of intimacy and kinship with God and all beings. For them, to be flooded with tears was the premier sign that one had fully embraced one’s fragility, sinfulness, and need for God’s grace, and that one was finally ready to be deeply transformed.¹⁷ The tears of a pierced heart signal one’s brokenness – one’s awareness of being overwhelmed by “the tear in the fabric of the whole”¹⁸ – and thus are a prerequisite to openness to being reknit into a new communion in which God is the primary reality and all beings are one’s kin.

While the practice of mourning for our devastated kin emphasizes being open to sharing in the sorrow of the pierced Heart, the practice of ecological restoration emphasizes our active accompaniment of land and creatures for the sake of healing. Ecological restoration is a scientific practice of working in concert with a degraded landscape to promote conditions in which it can restore itself to health. Many humans today find themselves either with practically no interaction with natural world, or with a consumerist, romanticized relationship in which we use nature for occasional pleasant experiences and forget about it the rest of the time. Participating in restoration projects is a physical way to get personally engaged in knowing and caring about a specific local ecosystem. It is an active, participative way of reparatively accompanying a damaged living community.

In his book *The Sunflower Forest*, William R. Jordan III makes the case that under current conditions of breakdown affecting both humans and the more-than-human world, widespread active participation in ecological restoration projects is the best hope of both.¹⁹ At this point, the damage done to most ecosystems is so extensive that they cannot restore themselves; only with wise and scientifically-informed human assistance can they again become fertile habitats for a wide diversity of creatures. At the same time, medical studies have shown that spending time outdoors and feeling connected to the landscapes and creatures in one’s environment have beneficial effects for human physical and mental health.²⁰ The “repair” of

both Earth and humanity depends on their rediscovery of the love God intends them to have for one another, and putting it into practice.

The inner depth of these practices of bearing the pain of the Earth and of compassionately accompanying our creaturely sisters and brothers as they seek healing can be found in devotion to the Heart at the heart of the world – the Sacred Heart of Jesus. This is how we can face the all-encompassing Earth crisis of our time, by living a renewed theology and spirituality of reparation as twenty-first century devotees of the Sacred Heart.

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Endnotes:

- 1 Email: frohlich@ctu.edu.
- 2 Lovelock, *Gaia*.
- 3 Stierli, *Heart of the Saviour*, 34.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 44.
- 5 Williams, *The Sacred Heart in the Life of the Church*, Chapter 3.
- 6 *Sermo in Cantico LXI, 4 (P.L. 183, 1072)*.
- 7 Debongnie, “Commencement et Recommencements de Dévotion de Coeur de Jésus,” 170.
- 8 Noffke, *Catherine of Siena*, 29.
- 9 Farinelli, “Le divin Cœur dans un trône de flammes.”
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 Le Brun, “Une Lecture Historique.”
- 12 Edwards, *Deep Incarnation*.

- 13 Gregersen, "Deep Incarnation: Why Evolutionary Continuity Matters in Christology," 176.
- 14 Edwards, *Ecology at the Heart of Faith*, 60.
- 15 For a fuller development of these insights, see Frohlich, *The Heart at the Heart of the World*.
- 16 Burton-Christie, "The Gift of Tears," 30.
- 17 Hausherr, *Penthos*.
- 18 Burton-Christie, "The Gift of Tears," 34.
- 19 Jordan, *The Sunflower Forest: Ecological Restoration and the New Communion with Nature*.
- 20 Payne and Delphinus, "A Review of the Current Evidence for the Health Benefits Derived from Forest Bathing."