



CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

ENGLAND AND WALES

Holiness Today: The Formation of the Human Heart

Archbishop Nichols delivers the 2011 Tablet Lecture

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Just four weeks ago, on the first anniversary of the Visit of Pope Benedict to this country, the Bishops' Conference issued an unusual document, indeed a unique one. It laid out clearly our aims and broad strategy for the next few years or so.

The statement reflected on the essence of the encouragement and challenge given to us by the Holy Father. That lies in the combination of the call to holiness and the challenge of the New Evangelisation. The two are inseparable. As Pope Benedict said in different circumstances: "Those who change the world for the better are holy, they transform it permanently, instilling in it the energies that only love, inspired by the Gospel, can elicit. The Saints are humanity's great benefactors."

The statement of the Bishops' Conference went on to present three overall strategic aims centred round mission, teaching and witness: the proclamation of the universal call to holiness in Christ as our priority in mission; the proclamation of Christ and his Gospel as the saving truth, through a culture of dialogue and solidarity as our second aim, and, thirdly, the proclamation of the coming of the Kingdom by serving and witnessing to the whole community, especially by supporting marginalised and vulnerable people.

This framework of thought will underlie this lecture. So it is right to start with the first of these priorities, the call to holiness in Christ as our fundamental task and concern.

This call to holiness was a constant theme in the Holy Father's speeches in the UK. Whether addressing the youngsters at Twickenham, the young adults in Westminster, or the great crowds at Hyde Park and Cofton Park, he made it clear that growth in faith is a matter of the heart, reflecting directly on the motto of the entire visit: 'heart speaks unto heart.'

The phrase, 'the formation of the heart' –the title of this evening's talk - is actually taken from 'Deus Caritas Est.' There it is described as "that encounter with God in Christ which awakens (their) love and opens the(ir) spirit to others." (para 31)

Speaking about faith at the great final Mass of World Youth Day, in Madrid in August, Pope Benedict pointed out two different ways of knowing Christ. He spoke of "an impersonal knowledge, one based on current opinion" as evoked by the Gospel question: "Whom do people say that I am?" But then he said this:

"Faith is more than just empirical or historical fact; it is an ability to grasp the mystery of Christ's person in all its depth. Yet faith is not the result of human effort, of human reasoning, but rather a gift of God. 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father in heaven.' Faith starts with God, who opens his heart to us and invites us to share in his own divine life. Faith does not simply provide information about who Christ is; rather it entails a personal relationship with Christ, a surrender of our whole person, with all our understanding, will and feelings, to God's self-revelation.'

What is the pathway to such faith? How are our hearts to be tutored if we are indeed to walk on this path and grow in the kind of holiness that alone is the foundation of all for which we long in the life and mission of the Church?

In attempting to respond to this question I would like to turn to an unlikely source: to a young Dutch woman, brought up without any religious faith although in a Jewish context, many years ago now. Her name is Etty Hillesum and many of you may have met her already, like me, through her writings. Yet they are so luminous that I have a sense of a far more personal knowledge. (cf 'Etty Hillesum: A Life Transformed' Patrick Woodhouse 2006)

She was born in 1914 and grew up in Amsterdam, living within a dysfunctional family, experiencing great emotional instability and a fairly chaotic sex and social life. Yet, in a two and a half year period from February 1941 to her death in November 1943, she came to a remarkable inner freedom and faith. She did so, initially, through a process of counselling and therapy through which she came to understand herself deeply. But the profound transformation within her came about through her discovery of the practice of silent contemplation, silent presence before the inner mystery of her life, which she came to recognise as God.

This is remarkable enough but what is more astonishing is that she made that journey in the harsh circumstances of the Amsterdam at that time: during the relentless persecution of all Jews and during her work in the transit camp of Westerbork, where Jews were held for transfer to death in Auschwitz.

Throughout her time of introspection and personal growth, Etty never wavered in her attention to those who were suffering. She was a daily angel of compassion and love in increasingly desperate circumstances. She rejected the possibility of escape for herself, choosing rather to stay with her people and face the certainty of death. At the same time, her diaries and letters are a remarkable testimony to her inner journey of faith and to her inner strength of which was never broken. On the contrary, she continued to exalt in the goodness of God even in the face of such utter degradation and death. Her final communication with us came when she herself was herded onto the death train, together with her parents and her brother. Then she sang with love and managed to thrust out of the cattle wagon one last message of hope in God.

In her writings she tells of the gradual way in which she became aware of and entered that inner space which is the place of our spiritual lives. She learned to be silent and still before herself and the reality of God. She spoke of it in these terms: "...time after time one must gather oneself together again around one's very centre. Herding together the disorderly flock of ...thoughts, emotions, sensations...like the good shepherd."

In this journey of inner discovery, she learned, as we must, to receive rather than describe and analyse. She learned the importance of our contemplative faculty saying: "You must live and breathe with your soul...if you live by your mind alone yours is but a poor existence." Her daily effort, then, was expressed in this learned conviction: "I have assigned an ever larger dwelling place for You... the powerful centre which spreads its rays to the outermost boundaries."

There is so much we can learn from this young woman about the life of the spirit within us. But one thing has left an indelible impression on me. It is this.

Etty talks about a particular outward expression of this inner journey. She speaks about kneeling. She is not talking about kneeling in church, for she never did so. It would seem that most of her kneeling was done in the bathroom. But she is so eloquent in finding and describing this outward expression of her inner contemplation, of her inner joy and freedom. Listen to some of her words about kneeling:

"It is as if my body had been meant and made for the act of kneeling. Sometimes, in moments of deep gratitude, kneeling down becomes an overwhelming urge....a gesture embedded in my body, needing to be expressed.....When I write these things down I still feel a little ashamed, as if I were writing about the most intimate of intimate matters. Much more bashful than if I had to write about my love life. But is there indeed anything as intimate a man's relationship to God?"

"Some time ago I said to myself, 'I am a kneeler in training'. I was still embarrassed by this act, as intimate as gestures of love that cannot be put into words.....except by a poet."

When, on 4 July 1942, a new raft of regulations were introduced against the Jews in Amsterdam, she writes: "I suddenly had to kneel down on the hard coconut matting in the bathroom, my head bowed so low that it nearly rested on my lap...I could remain like that for days, my body like the safe walls of a small cell, sheltering me right in its middle."

And again in October: "They are merciless, totally without pity....I suddenly had to kneel down on the hard coconut matting in the bathroom, and the tears poured down my face. And that prayer gave me enough strength for the rest of the day."

She describes kneeling "as an expression of what is still a deeply searching spirit." Kneeling becomes, for her, the outward expression of "allowing myself to be led not by anything on the outside but by what wells up from deep within me."

Here, I think, is the beginning of a model of our common quest for holiness, a way of tutoring of the heart. And, in Etty, it bore much fruit.

In her writing and in her living she describes that fruit:

This kind of prayer sustains the daily conviction that at the root of the human heart lie goodness and love.

It helps develop a personal sense of vocation, even destiny.

In Etty's life, this dialogue of the heart raised in her a readiness to bear sorrow, such that she could write: "Give your sorrow all the space and shelter in yourself that is its due."

And the same with compassion, a gift she never withdrew from those in need. The compassion, she said, which rises from such prayer shows that "there are no frontiers between suffering people". In this way, in the prison camp and even on the train to Auschwitz she was able to overcome every sense of condemning others or hating them.

And then, even more remarkably, her prayer gave rise within her to a keener eye for beauty in so many things and places. Because of this inner dialogue she was always harkening, listening, to all reality. She wrote of the beauty of the flowers just beyond the perimeter of the prison camp – a beauty that would sustain her through the day. She even spoke of the fleeting glimpse of compassion she could detect in the eye of the hard and merciless prison guard, such that she nurtured a love and a prayer for him too.

Her inner life of prayer, then, bore fruit in a sense of the goodness of life, a sense of vocation, a readiness to bear sorrow, the gift of compassion and attentiveness to the hidden beauty of life. But that is not all.

The fruit of her prayer brought her to an eloquent and enlightening appreciation of the nature of God's presence in the world. As she struggled with the question of where was God in the midst of the holocaust she came to this proclamation: "God's chosen way is helplessness. This is the only way in which God can be with us – in God's own helplessness. In this way God helps us. God becomes a vulnerable presence to be looked after and cherished in the human heart." And "if we care enough, God is in safe hands with us despite everything."

She prayed:

"You cannot help us but we must help you and must defend Your dwelling place within us to the last. There are, it is true, some who, even at this late stage are putting their vacuum cleaners and silver forks and spoons into safekeeping instead of guarding you dear God. And there are those who want to put their bodies in safekeeping but who are nothing more now than a shelter for a thousand fears and bitter feelings. And they say, 'I shan't let them get me into their clutches.' But they forget that no one is in their clutches who is in Your arms."

At moments such as these, I am struck by how close she stands to the fullness of Christian revelation. The deepest desire in my heart would have been to turn with Etty and face Jesus, on the cross. This she did not do; maybe she could not have done so. But that revelation of Jesus as the truth about God and the truth about ourselves was on the threshold of her experience.

What is particularly fascinating about Etty's experience is that it resonates strongly with Blessed John Henry Newman's insights about our human conscience. To appreciate this we must remember that for Newman 'conscience' has far more than a moral dimension to its meaning. Rather, it is an awareness of a mysterious other in one's own self-awareness, which may be better described as a 'consciousness' - a consciousness of the divine presence within the very depths of our being, of our hearts, calling us to an ever deeper interior life. Moreover, Newman holds that though such a 'conscience' should especially characterise the Christian life, the capacity for such an awareness of God is the property of every human heart. It is inscribed into our very human nature and is indeed the basis for 'natural' religion. (cf. Keith Beaumont, 'Introduction' and 'Prologue: Newman as theologian and spiritual guide' in 'John Henry . Newman: Doctor of the Church' ,Family Publications, 2005)

Newman also wrote of his first experience of conversion as being the step from this 'natural religion' to a personal relationship with the Lord. At that moment, in his youth, he became convinced of the true presence of two luminously self-evident beings, the self and the Creator. (cf 'Newman and Conversion', ed. Ian Ker DLT p.25) He became convinced that what was central to life was the personal relationship between those two.

If we can create the times and spaces to cultivate this human conscience wherein the divine is discovered, for people to search their hearts, fine tune their spiritual ears as it were, then they will hear the voice of God who wants to communicate himself to them even more fully.

Then the heart will be well prepared to receive the gift of Revelation, that gift which grants us an awareness of God who not only transcends the capacities of our unaided human nature, not only satisfies our deepest human desires in a manner beyond our imaginings, but does so by opening for us in Jesus Christ the personal relationship in which we can find the true and startling fullness of faith.

Our spiritual quest and formation, then, has to be shaped by our relationship with Jesus, a relationship formed and sealed in our baptism and strengthened in the sacraments.

The renewal of this quest may be assisted by turning to another central aspect of Blessed John Henry's teaching described as his "most fundamental theological rediscovery": the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. (Ian Ker, 'John Henry Newman', OUP, 1988, p 91) This, I suggest, is the key aspect of our theology which is to shape the formation of our hearts.

Newman writes beautifully of the Spirit in us and we in the Spirit as the Holy Spirit pervading us as sweet perfume enfolds a robe. This indwelling of the Holy Spirit is the source of the holiness to which we are all summoned. For the Holy Spirit enables us to contemplate God as Father and adore him with a pure heart; pure not primarily because of our goodness or innocence, but because it has become the Father's Temple, and pure, too, because it is one with the heart of the Son. The Holy Spirit, at once the Spirit of the Father and the Spirit of the Son, turns us constantly toward Christ. And Christ, in his turn, by virtue the same Spirit, makes his home in us, becoming an interior presence saving us from within.

When in faith we surrender to the Holy Spirit and permit Christ to enter into us we are transformed, recreated, into Christ. We become –without anything of our human nature being destroyed - partakers of the divine nature! This is why Christ was conceived of the Holy Spirit, why God became man that we might be deified! Such is the holiness to which we are called: nothing less than our hearts being formed into the very heart of God.

This nurturing, or transformation, of the human heart we must pursue through a deepening of our life of prayer. Only prayer roots us in Christ. Only prayer sustains the poise and purpose in life that befits a witness

to the reality of God's presence. Only prayer produces reverence for all things holy. Only prayer sustains the space and silence our spirits need if we are indeed to be guided and formed by God's Holy Spirit. As Cardinal Newman said: without prayer we cannot "radiate Christ; we become just another 'clashing symbol' in a world filled with growing noise and confusion."

This means that every one of us is called to renew in our lives the practice of daily prayer.

For this to be so, prayer has to be central to the life of every family, between children, parents, grandparents and friends. Only prayer gives true depth to family life. I recall the family rosary we recited regularly – even if reluctantly – at home. This may or may not suit everyone today. But what is essential are moments of quiet reflection, moments of shared prayer, accompanied by outward gestures of a shared faith. My parents gave me the simple blessing of the sign of the cross on my forehead along with their goodnight kiss. It became the sealing moment of the day, the context for sleep and the sure sign of the hidden goodness of God's love. Such habits of shared reflection, prayer and blessing, I suspect, are best established between couples even before their children are born. A life in which the presence of God and our trust in God is explicitly signalled and proclaimed is a life which is open to that extra dimension, that extra gift of the indwelling of God's Holy Spirit.

It was not by chance that the first project of the Bishops' Conference in support of family life was entitled 'Home is a holy place' and involved an exploration of all the ways in which the life of the spirit and the life of prayer are nurtured in the daily life of families. We still have to build on this, parish by parish, family by family.

Incidentally, it is instructive that following the Pope's visit, research showed that the most profound effect of the Visit on people was in the way they saw their family. One in three people said they would make family a bigger part of their lives. This translates into over 10 million adults saying they would think again about the time they committed to their families.

Research undertaken for this anniversary of the Papal Visit again showed the family to be central to people's concerns. When asked about the Church's role in British society, it was the promotion and support of family life that was by far the favoured response.

The challenge of promoting and developing the life of prayerful faith also faces our schools. I constantly rejoice in the great variety of ways in which so many Catholic schools keep in focus this spiritual dimension. I thank our teachers for all they do and I encourage them to be role-models of prayer. There are ready routines of primary school prayer with the 'prayer corners' to be found in most classrooms. As youngsters grow up this is seen in other ways: the patterns of prayer and sacramental celebrations in school life; creative expressions of prayer in music and dance; the search for the spiritual in the study of other religions; the wonderful participation of so many youngsters in special events and trips which can form such a powerful experience of the 'things of the heart'.

World Youth Day is a classic example. One of our young women wrote in these terms of her experience of Madrid this summer:

"While the educational sessions were extremely helpful in the practical aspects of my faith, I found the real life altering moments were in the incomprehensibly vast crowds as we welcomed Pope Benedict, prayed the Stations of the Cross and slept under the stars before celebrating Mass with the Pope the following morning. When the rain began that night in the airfield, two million people prayed for it to stop to allow for Adoration, and at the sight of the Blessed Sacrament – it did! I had never experienced such a crowd of young people so united and firm in their faith.

While the British media was disparaging the youth for their riotous behaviour, I had never had so much hope for our future. I quickly realised God was leading me in this pilgrimage; God wanted me in Madrid. Now my faith will never be the same and I am so thankful."

Another, when asked to explain the secret of this powerful experience said: "Catholic is what we are, not something we belong to!" That sense of common, inner identity, as opposed to a sense of membership of an organisation, is something for many of us to rediscover. Being a Catholic is a way of life, not a set of membership duties. Being a Catholic is expressed in everyday actions, the habits of a maturing faith, actions of devotion, kindness and, indeed, self-denial, actions which are willing expressions of our love of the Lord who alone is the source of our joy and freedom. These daily routines and actions are the true formation of the heart. They confirm the inner reality of our faith. Without them our faith is unlikely to deepen.

This means that we do well to think of our parishes, first and foremost, as being schools of prayer, places and communities in which we are encouraged in prayer, tutored in prayer and all contribute to prayer. The rich flowering of so many different ways of prayer and devotion can rightly find their place in our parish life. Prayer which is truly formed in the faith of the Church, and truly expresses that faith will enrich our shared life. And surely there is to be a special place in our prayer, in every parish, for Eucharistic Adoration. It hardly needs saying that in praying the Mass our hearts enter into profound communion with God's heart. And when that communion is wounded we must pray for healing. Such prayer is answered in the Sacrament of Penance, where hearts are set free to pray all the more joyfully. Prayer, then, is the foundation of all. Through prayer we can become ever more conscious of our dignity as a priestly people, "called to consecrate the world to God through lives of faith and holiness." (Pope Benedict XVI, Westminster Cathedral, Sept 2010)

But we have a job to do in taking this perspective into the public forum. So the second task we have set ourselves is that of teaching, especially by dialogue and solidarity. At the centre of this dialogue is the quest for a true understanding of the human person.

Perhaps the greatest arena we have for this, as a Church, is our Catholic education. Here, it seems to me, most public discourse about education centres ultimately on this very point which we are exploring.

When we think of a youngster, at home or in school, what do we see?

Well, we see someone whom we hope will become a responsible adult member of society, someone who embraces duties and responsibilities and respects the needs and rights of others.

We also see a person whom we hope can develop their talents and abilities to become a productive member of society, able to contribute to economic and social success for the common good of all.

We also see a person who has a personal vocation, a call to the fullness of life and love, often expressed in profound friendship, in marriage, in a religious dedication. We hope that this level of mature commitment will be part of what lies ahead for each of our youngsters.

But we also have to keep in mind that every youngster is also a spiritual being, called to know and love God made visible in Christ Jesus, and to be happy with God for all eternity after earthly death. To live without this perspective is to see life without its extra dimension. I am no expert on 3D television and films. But I suspect the gift of our Christian faith is a bit like donning the 3D glasses and seeing everything in its full richness. The same reality is seen by all. But the eyes of faith bring a new and enhancing vision in which we do indeed see life whole.

Great teachers of the life of the heart, of the spiritual dimension of our nature and of the fruitfulness of that spirit in action are eloquent in this task of 'seeing life whole'. It corresponds to the famous prayer of Pope St Gregory the Great when he asked for 'the grace to see life whole and the power to speak effectively of it', for love of the Lord.

Our Catholic faith, illuminating reason, shapes that sight and fashions this task. We see life whole when we recognise the true nature of the unborn child. We see life whole when we recognise that the well-being of every human person has to be at the centre of our economic life, the ultimate purpose of our striving and the measure by which we are to judge success. We see life whole when we recognise the limited value of our

personal experience as the criterion of moral truth. We see life whole when, in sickness and terminal illness, we both treasure life as it is and do not fear death when it comes, so that we neither deny the dignity of life at its endings, nor fail to welcome our journey to God when He calls.

In this searching for the capacity to see life whole, aided by the dialogue between faith and reason, it is important to hold on to the contemplative quality of both of those partners. The contemplation of faith we have been reflecting on. But there is a contemplative aspect to reason, too, which can easily be lost. Indeed, this happens in a narrow positivist understanding of reason and of truth, when they are understood to be based on the empirical evidence alone. In this way, reason and truth become based on the findings of science and of physical observation. Of course empirical evidence has a crucial part to play, but left to that alone, our reason becomes a kind of scientism.

One example of this can be seen when the notion of 'nature' and 'natural law' is taken to mean the observable patterns of human behaviour and development. Dialogue between Christian teaching and evolution theories illustrate that. But the true notion of natural law is more the product of contemplation than observation and scientific analysis. It is about philosophy more than biology. Only by contemplation, reflection, do we come to an understanding of what is meant by our deepest human nature and the claim it has on us.

Pope Benedict addressed this issue in his address to the German Parliament. There he spoke of how reason (or conscience) and nature were "the universally valid source of law". He described conscience as "nothing other than Solomon's listening heart, reason that is open to the language of being" and traced the breakdown in this structure to the emergence of positivist understandings of both nature and reason, both subject to the rules and limitations of science. Dramatically he described the effects of relying only on positivism, which recognises as objective nothing beyond function, as like living in "a concrete bunker in which we ourselves provide lighting and atmospheric conditions, being no longer willing to obtain either from God's wide world." Then he continues: "And yet we cannot hide from ourselves the fact that even in this artificial world we are still covertly drawing upon God's raw materials, which we refashion into our own products." Then his appeal: "The windows must be flung open again, we must see the wide world, the sky and the earth once more and learn to make proper use of it." Then the question: "How can nature reassert itself in its true depth, with all its demands, with all its directives?" He continued: "The importance of ecology is no longer disputed. We must listen to the language of nature and we must answer accordingly...Man too has an ecology that he must respect and that he cannot manipulate at will. Man is not merely self-creating freedom. Man does not create himself. He is intellect and will, but he is also nature and his will is rightly ordered if he respects his nature, listens to it and accepts himself for who he is, as one who did not create himself. In this way, and in no other, is true human freedom fulfilled."

Throughout this address, Pope Benedict alluded to the one gift essential to the ruler, the one gift for which Solomon prayed: the gift of a listening heart "so that he may govern God's people and discern between good and evil." (1 Kings 3.9) In our public discourse, and in the part in it which the Church can play, we need much more of this quality: a listening heart, listening to the deepest patterns and reasons which bring us into touch with our shared human nature rather than our individuality, into touch with the spiritual realm rather than just the positivism of logic and science, into touch with the Wisdom which is God, the Creator Spirit, which makes of our nature not just an 'is' but also an 'ought', not just an experience but also a command, which, in the tumult of our emotions and efforts, we may find difficult to discern and obey.

The fashioning of a listening heart is a crucial part of our desire to engage with society.

This is so also for the third aspect of our reflection on the challenge left to us by Pope Benedict: the proclamation of the coming of the Kingdom by the support of vulnerable and marginalised people.

'Deus Caritas Est' makes clear that the work of the Church and its agencies in the relief of poverty and need of every kind must always be work springing from the love of Christ. The 'formation of the heart', in its encounter with Christ, means that "love of neighbour will no longer be a commandment imposed". It will not be aligned to an ideology or political party, nor is it an act of proselytism. I quote: "Those who practise charity in the Church's

name will never seek to impose the Church's faith on others. They realise that a pure and generous love is the best witness to the God in whom we believe and by whom we are driven to love. A Christian knows when it is time to speak of God and when it is better to say nothing and to let love alone speak."

For me a simple image of our social activity in response to need can help. It is like a strong plant, rooted in the soil of faith, growing tall with the stalks and branches of true professionalism, but also flowing in faith and a love which show forth the beauty of God. Formation of the heart, in its search for God, in its relationship to Christ, in the life of prayer, is vital for all who act in the name of the Church in our activities of 'caritas'.

The key messages of the Holy Father's Visit are summed up in his invitation to us that we are to be witnesses to the beauty of holiness, to the splendour of the truth and to the joy and freedom born of a relationship with Christ. This is the true purpose of our formation of the heart, so that heart may speak unto heart.

I know that the joy and freedom born of our loving relationship with Him can lift the burden of so much anxiety and strife from our hearts in the life of the Church so that others may see the hope and consolation we receive from Him.

+Vincent Nichols

Archbishop of Westminster