

# Heart Spirituality and the lay vocation

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## COMPASS

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*This year we Missionaries of the Sacred Heart are commemorating the 150th anniversary of our foundation, and in Australia we will next year be commemorating our Centenary as a Province of the Society. We are currently paying special attention to the things that are important to us Missionaries of the Sacred Heart. The following is the text of a keynote address to the MSC Parishes Conference held in Adelaide in November 2003.*

THE TASK TONIGHT requires a mystic and a poet. A mystical openness we definitely have to have: a poetic spirit would be handy.

On the mystical side we should begin by attuning ourselves to our gathering as a gathering in the Spirit—and attuning also to our meeting place as a sacred space. We may think that our gathering in this beachside suburb is just a convenient arrangement. If we have a sense of the mystical, however, and a hope in the Spirit we must open ourselves to all the mysteries of place and gathering.

Every place is like a sea shell: if we listen to it intently we hear murmurs from other times. We should acknowledge these murmurs. First of them, of course, are those of the Aboriginal people who lived here over aeons: they lived in reverent exchange with the Mystery which they sensed in the land and the sea. The noted anthropologist, Professor Stanner, who worked with the MSC among the Port Keats people, made a statement about the traditional Aboriginal languages; in contrast to the languages of modern culture where a thing is only allowed, as far as possible, to be one precise thing—in those Aboriginal languages a thing is never just a thing. Every being has an inwardness, a mystery. It takes a mystical or at least a poetic spirit to sense this inwardness. From that perception we know we are not just creatures of the everyday world, growing older, growing tired. We recall, then, as Christians that we are those over whom sacred words were spoken, blessed oils bestowed, living waters poured. From that consecration we are called to be passionate people. Like the ancient Jacob we must awaken to where we are: this is truly a holy gathering in a blessed place.

Of course the everyday world clings to us. We are living in a time of high anxiety and confusion. Confusion is a sign of the evil one. People's souls are in disorder. We may not take even ourselves for granted. Yet amid this distress there are signs of the Spirit moving among the people. And if the Spirit of God is breaking among us, who would be so foolish as to stay dulled in the confusion. But is there breakthrough? Who can tell us? We look to those who have some gift for reading the signs of the times. I will mention a few such people in these talks, beginning with our own bishop Jim Cuskelly. Even before Vatican II Jim recognised that MSC were called to rediscover the Founder Jules Chevalier's spirituality of the heart. On becoming superior general of the MSC he helped MSC around the world to discern their directions by means of that spirituality.

Last year I was privileged to attend a conference on Cuskelly's work held at Issoudun, France. I was impressed by the respect with which he is held by the international Chevalier family, which includes lay people. After his period as superior general Jim was appointed auxiliary bishop of Brisbane. During his eighteen years as bishop his viewpoint changed. Whereas his previous writings were mostly directed to priests and religious, he began to write for lay people—but the spirituality he offered remained the spirituality of the heart. In the years of his dying he wrote a book specifically for lay people's spirituality, *Walking the Way of Jesus*. It was inspired by the recognition that there dwelt a desire for union with Christ within many lay people. Moreover, he perceived this desire as a vocation, a lay vocation. He wrote:

In our days the desire for a strong spiritual life does not automatically suggest a vocation to the priesthood or the cloister... In former times we spoke of practising Catholics, those who performed the duties of the faith such as Mass on Sundays. Today this emphasis on duties does not resonate for many. They desire a way of spirituality which they can live in the midst of their families, their work, their parish, social life and neighbourhood (Walking The Way, 13-14).

He was convinced that the Church's future lies through the growth of the lay vocation. A sign of the times... The force with which the lay vocation has taken off worldwide confirms his perception.

Of course the lay vocation takes varied forms: there are specifically lay movements, there are laity associated with religious orders, there are lay people who prefer an individual path. I believe we MSC should support whatever path lay people feel drawn to. However, it is significant, as I mentioned, that Jim Cuskelly believed that Chevalier's spirituality of the heart was particularly suitable for lay people. Which raises the question: did Jules Chevalier himself envision the spirituality of the heart of Jesus as meant for lay people? Of course, yes! Every project of Chevalier—the preaching of the Sacred Heart in parishes, his books and brochures, building the basilica of the Sacred Heart, originating devotion to our Lady of the Sacred Heart, the foreign missions, lay associations including a Third Order—all were to begin a movement of people around the world committed to the spirituality of love. The MSC motto proclaimed it boldly: 'May the Sacred Heart of Jesus be loved in every place'.

When I was a child in the Coogee MSC parish being prepared for First Communion my grandmother told me how fortunate I was. When she was growing up the emphasis was on fear and reverence towards the sacraments. One might go to communion once a year and only after confession. In her experience of religion there were two great moments: first, Pius X's proposition of communion for children and frequent communion; the second, the MSC preaching of the love of the Heart of Jesus. To her that had come like a new religion of hope and encouragement. It had changed her life. I believe that effect was not uncommon in her generation and the one which followed. Which leads to a further question: Did the promotion of this spirituality appear to flag during the second half of the twentieth century?

Perhaps among the MSC the foreign missions took the energy and the primacy. Perhaps most of all there was a change in the mentality of the west following the horrors and stress of World War II, the outbreak of the Cold War, the threat of nuclear annihilation. People wanted a spiritual word that touched these anxieties and uncertainties. I believe the spirituality of the heart could have been a healing balm if we had attended to these wounds more sensitively and flexibly. Jim Cuskelly in the 1950s recognised that Chevalier's heart spirituality was deeply rooted in the whole tradition of the bible and of the mystics. From that depth Chevalier's spirituality held the possibility of spiritual breadth and sensitivity. Cuskelly's was the voice pointing us in that direction.

It is no coincidence, I believe, that the re-kindling of heart spirituality associated with Cuskelly has taken place in the same period as the emergence of the lay vocation. This providential linking of the two speaks to us MSC. If we could be penetrated with a sense of the lay vocation and, at the same time, with the fire of heart spirituality, we would be responding, from the depth of our vocation, in the spirit of our founder.

Jules Chevalier's dream for the laity was prophetic. In the last twenty to thirty years we have seen a growth of lay MSC in Australia and around the world. How can this go forward? There are two considerations: on the one hand, the lay vocation is a grace given to lay people; on the other hand, in the Church clergy, religious and laity act in mutual concert. Historically there is a providential relationship between religious congregations and laity whereby religious make available their spiritual way. Likewise the religious have much to learn from lay people, particularly at this time. For this work to go forward there are many steps to be taken, conversions from older mindsets. At some stage, I believe, we would need to hold a congress of religious and lay msc to upgrade our skills and directions. In view of such a congress, I will offer some approaches to heart spirituality which may be found helpful for the lay vocations.

### Primordial Words

Some people are put off by the word heart: they take it as referring literally to the physical organ. Let us begin by entering into the experience behind this singular word.

You may remember that Cathy Freeman declared her decision to resign from world competitive athletics came from her heart. Do we know what she meant by 'came from her heart'? We say, yes. But if we are pushed to say precisely how the decision came from her heart we may be struggling. That is the paradox of the word heart: we feel we know but at the same time its meaning is obscure. It is a strange word. It is called a primordial word. We get near what primordial means if we approach it as mystical and poetic. Primordial words are poetic in so far as they voice the depths of existence whilst not presuming to sort them out. They give us images not analysis. Think of Blake's line: 'To see a world in a grain of sand', such a poetic line rouses wonder, even a mystical spirit—but it stops short of explaining itself: that is part of its poetic power. Heart also points towards the depth of whom one is, but it holds back from a definition lest it lose the deeper meanings it can evoke.

Even in our western culture and language we have some words which readily suggest something more. Take water or star for example. A scientist can tell us how to recognise a star; how it is formed—and how gravity affects it. A poet, however, looks into the night sky and can be affected by a primordial wonder.

Or the word water. For science it is H<sub>2</sub>O, but the word can also touch human depths. Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman of living water, and from Christ's pierced side on the cross the disciple witnessed a flow of blood and water and was shaken by its import. Or, there is a line from the Hebrew Psalms '(O God) my body yearns for you like a dry weary land without water'. That poetic line is heart music playing the primordial notes. And notice how much the mystical and poetic run together.

There are other primordial words which can be strongly mystical such as the holy, the sacred, spirit, fire. Each can speak from the source of reality within us. Miriam Rose Ungummerr, Aboriginal artist and educator from the Daly River, NT, uses the primordial word of her own language, Dadirri. It means 'deep inner springs': a heart word more imaginative than ours. Miriam insists that by going into the bush and sitting quietly we may get in touch with the deep inner springs. At some time mystical words will rise to our consciousness such as Jesus and Saviour. Thus heart words work across all cultures in their languages.

So far I have spoken of the heart as a word. Obviously there is a primordial experience which lies behind the word. For example, we have all at some time wept, not out of sentiment but from a source deep within us, quite unexpectedly. Sometimes the weeping can be prolonged. Les Murray wrote a poem, 'An absolutely ordinary rainbow', about a man who wept in the middle of the Sydney business district. Such tears are from the source of true care within us.

Another example is the smile. No one has to be taught to smile. Babies do it beautifully. Smiles are generally spontaneous. Yet they sometimes touch the most tender feelings in other people. Perhaps it is these movements from within us, like weeping and smiling, which most convince us we are beings of heart. They also demonstrate that the heart is deeper than the ego and sometimes gets past the ego to communicate with other hearts. Heart speaks to heart.

Yes, although there is an autonomy of the heart, we can dispose ourselves to be open to it. As noted, Miriam Rose Ungummerr recommends that sitting quietly in the bush offers a contemplative space attractive to the heart. From that awakening of the heart mystical words and images would arise.

You may say, I don't think that would happen for me. St Augustine had an answer for that. He wrote: if you think God has not touched your heart, wait till He does. (Treatise 26 On St John, quoted in Coventry 1963, 29.)

There is another way by which the heart is awakened, a way very relevant to lay people: the experience of falling-in-love. Again St Augustine put this strongly: 'a lover will understand'. (Coventry 1968, 30.) Long centuries after Augustine, the poet Dante saw the young Beatrice on a street in Florence. He beheld her whom his heart loved. He declared that through this love he knew that there was a Christ, knew there was a Saviour. Love awakens the inner eye. The primordial words begin to speak.

Besides the romantic love of young people, there are other forms of love, such as love in marriage and love of children. Years ago I ran seminars on people's religious experience. The strongest experience for some was at the birth of their first child. Some of the fathers were eloquent on this.

There is also the love of friendship and compassionate care for those suffering, for those struggling with poverty, for one's fellow workers or neighbours and so on. All those loves are at the core of lay life and so of the lay vocation.

The question may be coming to your mind: how did primordial words arise? The phrasing of that question reveals how we moderns think. We take it that literal or practical words are the norm and we wonder how these funny primordial words got into language. That is the mindset we have to shake. Recall again Professor Stanner's words which I quoted early on: in Aboriginal languages a thing is never just a thing. A thing, to us, appears to be basic to language: that thing is a chair, that other thing is a tree: this thing is an animal. There is no mystery about them. That is what they are in practical, literal terms. What Professor Stanner stated was that our western emphasis upon the literal and practical almost to the exclusion of the symbolic and mystical did not happen in the traditional languages. In fact the traditional Aborigines treasured the conjunction between the two; they sensed an inwardness in all beings, an inwardness which immediately evoked the symbolic and mystical.

What happened in western culture was that it distinguished strictly between literal practical words and symbolic or mystical words. Only a few words kept a strong conjunction between the two: heart is one of these.

How does this understanding of the heart as primordial relate to the Sacred Heart? Recall Cathy Freeman's declaration that her decision came from her heart. It touched something in who she is. She was conscious of meaning a lot in the hearts of her people and of many others. People who attain such a place in people's hearts are brought strongly into the mystic unity of human existence. In her withdrawing she may have felt as if she was tearing at that unity of hearts.

These reflections on Cathy Freeman have focussed on her attaining, at heart level, to the unity of human existence. Each of us is meant to exist within that unity of hearts. Many people attain this only in a small circle of family and friends. Others like Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela have been great hearted liberators of their people. And there are also others like Therese of Lisieux, known to few people in her lifetime, who became well known at heart level after her death. But there is a further difference. Therese's heart was focussed on God in Christ. She worshipped the divine love within the heart. Thus the Sacred Heart brings us into the Mystery of God become a human being. Christ Jesus is truly human and truly divine. As truly human, his heart is the point of unity for all human hearts. As the heart for all hearts he acts to become the saviour and liberator of all hearts.

Christ is also truly divine. His heart carries the fire of charity springing up from the Trinity.

To sum up what I have tried to say about heart spirituality: reflection on primordial words brings us to acknowledge ourselves as mystical heart beings living within the unity of human existence. Further, we have begun to reflect on the mystery of the divine love in a human heart.

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In preparing this paper a memory came to me from the early 1960s when my duties included teaching religion to the senior classes at Chevalier College, Bowral, NSW. I had happened upon a book by the French theologian Yves Congar entitled *Lay People in the Church*. Congar, a Dominican, was one of the leading theologians at Vatican Council II. His book on the lay vocation was published years before the council, in 1953, and had a great influence. I found the book exciting and new, something the senior classes might benefit to hear about. I recall, for example, Congar's stress that human nature, though it has its wounds and weaknesses, remains essentially good and open to the divine in Christ. Therefore, people do not have to enter a celibate group in order to give themselves to God—unless they are called to do so.

One day after class the vice-captain caught up with me and said, 'if people can find a vocation to follow Christ in lay life, this makes it harder for those who may be thinking of the priesthood or religious life'. That discussion, from thirty-eight years ago, still has some resonance in the Church today. I should mention that the young man went on to have a long and happy marriage, six children of whom the older ones are married. And he is still very interested in his religion.

As that story suggests, the lay vocation seemed novel in Australia in the 1950s and 1960s. But no longer. Now we can look back with new eyes to Jules Chevalier's dream of a lay movement: its time has come. Jim Cuskelly's contribution was to have recognised the desire in the hearts of many lay people for a spirituality to live by. He proposed a heart spirituality for the lay vocation.

Now I want to consider heart spirituality for the lay vocation from another viewpoint than Cuskelly's—that suggested by Fr Karl Rahner, a prince of twentieth-century Catholic theologians. Through the 1940s and 1950s Rahner, a German, observed a crumbling of the religious culture in the old Catholic areas of Germany. It seemed to him that something similar was happening throughout the west as cultures became more secularised. Rahner wondered how much faith would be left in the mass of the people? How many would survive as Catholics? The future of the Church, then, would depend mainly on groups and individuals who had taken on a spirituality accessible to them as lay people. He believed that the spirituality needed would have to be open to the mystical. He put it bluntly: the Christian of the future will be something of a mystic or nothing (Theological Investigations, vol. 20, 149). Next came the question: is there a spirituality both open to the mystical and accessible? Rahner recommended the spirituality of the pierced heart of Jesus (Servants Of The Lord, ch. 7).

The convergence of the Rahner and Cuskelly viewpoints is obvious. Cuskelly recognised the desire among lay people; Rahner foresaw the need for this mystical spirituality for the future of the Church.

In our time in Australia we are experiencing what Rahner foresaw forty-five years ago. The drift away happened. Are we ready to promote the spirituality of the heart in a manner which meets the desires and needs of lay people? For me Rahner's urgent words throw light upon the often quoted statement of Pope Pius IX to Jules Chevalier: 'The Church and society have no hope except in the heart of Jesus'.

Incidentally, Rahner wrote of heart as a primordial and mystical word. He stressed that opening one's own heart is necessary for relating to the heart of Jesus: it is heart that speaks to heart. And what he especially insisted upon was the mystical. A Christian has to be something of a mystic—or nothing. It is time to say what is meant by mystical.

We recognise the mystical when one's heart is stirred, however gently, by an awesome love, a love which breaks into our everyday mind and world. It is difficult to speak of this love because it is not an object; not for our mind and not for our senses. It is sometimes described as uncanny. It seems to rise unaccountably from a deep place within us. It can be dramatic at times, even overwhelming. More commonly it can be so gentle we may fail to notice it. In the spirituality of the heart we have to learn to notice it. In our culture the mystical is discounted. However it is interesting that a number of surveys, in England particularly, have found that a high percentage of people have had some such experience.

How do spirituality and mystical experience relate together? Spirituality may be understood as a walk within mystery. Of course for everybody anxieties and uncertainties are part of life. Even confirmed atheists live life without understanding why things happen as they do—and even who they are themselves. In the spirituality of the heart we remember that Jesus embraced from his heart all the anxieties, the uncertainties and the evil of human life. With him we are gifted to embrace them also. So, we walk; we take step after step in the darkness, against the fears. There is a darkness which is fearsome mystery—but also in the darkness there is the mystery of His love. It is that mystery that enables us to walk. His heart draws us onward.

### Exchange Of Life

In that mystical drawing of our hearts to Jesus, we reach towards a life of union. To explain this further I will follow the work of an English woman theologian who has been a wife, the mother of a large family and one who has known the lay vocation from the inside: Rosemary Haughton. A woman who discovered a lay spirituality for herself—and it is the spirituality of the heart. For the remainder of this talk I will take up what she found to be central to the love relationship with Jesus: the exchange of hearts which is tied in with an exchange of life. They will take some explaining, but they are deeply human. (The Passionate God.)

A difficulty with speaking of a love relationship with Christ Jesus is that we can get terribly serious. This gets us off key. Fortunately, the day before I wrote the next part of this talk, I had celebrated Mass at the Aboriginal Church at La Perouse, Sydney. In the period before we started Mass there were several little toddlers racing

about from side to side in the circular space between the pews. Now they would be kissed and cuddled and swung about by the people on one side: then they would race to the other side for more of the same. They drank the love into their being. Little children are uninhibited about their delight. And we adults get much delight from them. It is an exchange of love-ability. They make us feel good—and we them.

When two people fall in love, it is an exchange of lovability. They both want to let the other into their lives and into their hearts. Paul the Apostle wrote: 'I live now not I but Christ lives in me'. Christ delights to live in our lives—and He wants us to delight to live in His. The heart is not a talent to lie buried in the ground and returned to the Master un-used. The heart is made for exchange... However, as we know to our regret, there is an inner resistance to exchange. One has to wait sometimes for the breakthroughs to love.

The tension between desire and resistance is obvious in the couple entering marriage. The exchange of vows and the exchange of rings symbolise the desire for exchange of life. As we pray for them we know that years of marriage will either block or set free their exchange. They will need to break through to deeper levels of heart. Family life will test and deepen them.

Exchange of hearts is at the core of Jules Chevalier's heart spirituality. It is the transforming power of love. I have checked through a number of quotations from Chevalier on this point. He exulted in the holy exchange between the human and the divine. I received an insight on this matter at the Issoudun, France, Conference of 2002. Issoudun was the site of Chevalier's life work. I was struck by his many projects including his endless writing and speaking on the loving desires of Jesus for us. At first I thought of Chevalier as possessed by his personal love of Jesus. But then I understood: it was not so much Jules' passion for Christ which impelled him. Chevalier had experienced mystically something of the passionate love in the heart of Jesus. The initiative in our love story comes from Him. As John wrote: 'It is not that we have loved God but that God has first loved us'. He wants to be with us.

This passionate love desire of Christ is reinforced by a statement in the Gospel of John: 'God is Love. Whoever lives in love lives in God'. What could be plainer? Yet we may be somewhat nervous in declaring that the inmost character of God is to be understood by the phenomenon of love. And you may argue that human words only say what God is 'like' to a limited degree. To a large degree any human quality we ascribe to God falls short of what God truly is. So maybe saying God is Love may really mean God is kind and just, leaving out the turbulence and messiness of our experience of love. No. Leaving out the messiness; sanitising love betrays the Incarnation. It suggests that God's love in Christ is less enraptured, less passionate than ours. The opposite is the truth. God's love differs by being more than ours; more passionate, infinitely more enraptured.

An effect of believing in this passionate love of Jesus is that it challenges one's faith more sharply. I recall being invited to preach in a Melbourne parish for the feast of the Sacred Heart. I tried to convey the appeal of the passionate heart of Jesus. After Mass there was a queue of people at the sacristy door. How can God be loving if he lets such and such happen in my family or to my daughter who is on drugs, and so on? I believe their anger was another way of appealing to Christ. Yet the anger had to be taken seriously. I pointed out that, whilst there is an awful amount of suffering and evil in our world, there is also goodness, love and beauty. Though we cannot bring them together in our limited minds, we must not let hopelessness triumph over faith and love. Jesus embraced suffering and evil in His love, forgiving his executioners, etc. Somehow, through the pain of others, we suffer with the heart of Jesus. It is part of our exchange of life.

Another aspect of exchange of life is that we should be frank with our Beloved. If the touch of suffering has upset our loved ones, we should express our confusion to the Lord. He calls us to intimacy. He is not offended by honesty. In fact the struggle to maintain openness in spite of confusion and hurt is always a part of love.

The story lines of contemporary novels and films commonly tell the story of people who endure years of lonely longing and yet consistently fail to recognise their true love—who patiently waits for them to notice. When reading an introduction to the doctrine of Purgatory, I realised that this story line unconsciously mirrors today's spiritual situation. Jesus is the unrecognised true love.

For my generation and later the images of Purgatory suggested an All-seeing Parent who will certainly punish us for what we have been up to. Quite opposite is God as the unrecognised lover who waits patiently for us. In

the latter image, the Heart of Christ never gives up on us. Purgatory is God still working to draw us to his love; it shows the patience and tenacity of his love.

Much more could be said of exchange of heart and exchange of life—especially for our encouragement in these times and in living with our personal weaknesses. Paul the Apostle attributed his perseverance to his exchange of life with Christ: ‘Gladly will I glory in my own weaknesses that the power of Christ may dwell in me’.

Let me now draw towards a conclusion by returning to the kinship between poetry and the mystical. Our sense of the mystical is often well expressed through the beauty of words. Not that poetry and mysticism are the same thing. Indeed some contemporary poetry is aggressively secular. On the other hand there is the poetry of the biblical prophets, the psalms, the Song of Songs and sections of the New Testament such as Mary’s Magnificat.

But what is the kinship between poetry and mystical experience? I would recall again those words of Professor Stanner’s which I have mentioned several times: (in Aboriginal languages) ‘a thing is never just a thing’. For the early peoples the beings of this world have an inwardness which opens to Mystery. That Mystery draws people to mystical experience. I defined spirituality as a walk within Mystery. That is readily understood if one has experienced one’s own heart, one’s own openness to sacred Mystery. The poet Emily Dickinson, writes of the heart as ‘finite infinity’. The Aboriginal language sensed that openness to infinity in the land around them. I find this edge of breakthrough in a number of Australian writers. I was first struck by it as a boy at Douglas Park in John Shaw Neilson’s poem, ‘The Orange Tree’. A young girl perceives, within an ordinary orange tree, an inwardness from which emanates an unearthly light. To me this reads as clearly a mystical experience. The light arises from within the girl as an awesome love but manifests itself outwardly in the orange tree.

However, the young girl is not alone. Throughout the poem she has to cope with the hectoring voice of a very rational adult, probably a man. He is determined to explain away the experience she is having. As the poem begins we hear the voice of this adult:

*The young girl stood beside me. I  
Saw not what her young eyes could see  
—a light, she said, not of the sky  
Lives somewhere in the orange tree.*

The girl tries to describe the experience. She speaks of it first as a light, then as a voice. Then as not a voice, as sound but not quite as a sound. This is not an object which she can grasp. It is touching her own inwardness and taking varied forms.

*Listen! the young girl said. There calls  
No voice, no music beats on me;  
But it is almost sound; it falls  
This evening on the orange tree.*

Finally the girl tells the rationalising adult to be silent. She defends her mystical experience against the modern rationalism. Karl Rahner would be smiling.

*Silence! the young girl said, oh why  
Why will you talk to weary me?  
Plague me no longer now, for I  
Am listening like the orange tree.*

She is not listening to the orange tree but listening like the orange tree. This being, the tree, is reflecting the light of another world, the light of Mystery. The girl wants to share in that. Spirituality is a walk within Mystery.

Let me sum up on the spirituality of the heart. First: the evidence is that we are mystical heart beings. Second: the heart lives mystically by exchange—exchange of heart with Jesus and exchange of life with Him. Through that exchange we can embrace all the anxieties and uncertainties of life.

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*The Heart of the divine Master is the centre on which converges everything in the Old and New Testament; the pivot around which everything in Catholicism turns. That is how I understand devotion to the Sacred Heart: it embraces everything, it is the answer to everything.*

—Jules Chevalier, letter 9 March 1862).

*This comprehensive view of Sacred Heart devotion was not a passing enthusiasm for Jules Chevalier. Much later in life he made the same point based on years of personal experience and study. Towards the end of his long book on the Sacred Heart he showed that what he had written was not simply a description of some acts of piety but a whole vision of Christian faith and morality.*