

Claiming Our Heritage: What Is It We Are Claiming?

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“What Is It We Are Claiming?” It is a significant question, but it is not important for its own sake. In fact, it could be a self-indulgent question, unless we take the next step and ask “Why claim our heritage?”

It is a strange word, heritage. In its narrower sense, it often means “lot or portion by birth,” that is, something about which we can do nothing except receive it. But we more often use it, as here, in its broader sense of values or traditions passed from earlier generations: for example, our American heritage or our democratic heritage, our Catholic or Christian or Jewish or other religious heritage, our family heritage, and so on. Much of this is something we could not and did not choose for ourselves initially, though we can confirm and celebrate that heritage later – or even reject or ignore it.

I said earlier that “What Is It We Are Claiming?” could be a self-indulgent question, and I meant it. If I claim any heritage – American, democratic, Catholic, family, Sacred Heart – in order to bask in it, to pride myself on it, to feel superior to those who do not have it, I am abusing or violating that heritage in a very real way. In the meaning of heritage in its broad sense, that is, values or traditions passed from earlier generations, there is an implicit assumption that what I have received will in turn be passed on by or through me to future generations. That is the nature of a heritage. Hence, when we claim it, we accept a solemn responsibility: what I have been given must be passed on to others. This is the reason we claim a heritage. Thus, implicit in the question “What Is It We are Claiming?” is an obligation to the future. We have a duty or, even stronger, a mandate – to pass along what we have received; we are accountable to those who came before us and answerable to those who come after us.

In preparation for this talk, I sent a request several months ago to a dozen or more women in the southwest whom I believe have an understanding of the charism and mission of the Society of the Sacred Heart. Some are currently involved with Sacred Heart alumnae groups, others are communicating the heritage they have received in other ways. I sought their insights on the nature of the Sacred Heart heritage we are claiming, asking them to respond to one or several of the following questions in ways which would capture their sense of the heritage and what it means to the person responding:

How would you describe the Sacred Heart heritage?
How has it been transmitted to you?
What is your sense of its constituent elements?
How has the heritage empowered your life?
Are there identifying factors which have enabled you to recognize the heritage?
How can this heritage shape our future?

The comments moved me and inspired me. These are generous, caring women... united with Christ in their own way, empowered in their service of family and others, giving freely to all those around them the gifts of intelligence, education, and faith which they have received from God, from their families, and from their education.

Their responses to the way in which the Sacred Heart heritage is transmitted struck a resonant chord in me. Years ago, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Society of the Sacred Heart focused on the mandate of Vatican Council II to religious congregations within the Church to renew themselves in the spirit and charism of their founder or foundress. In community discussions, in general meetings and chapters, RSCJ probed the charism of St. Madeleine Sophie; where is it to be found? How do we identify it so it can be communicated? There was a lot of wisdom and insight in those discussions. My own conclusion, strengthened in the years since, is that the charism, though subject to some articulation which does not convey the whole of it, inheres in the people and is transmitted through them. Many respondents to my survey said the same thing, that is, that the spirit and charism are transmitted by contact with RSCJ and with others whose lives have been permeated by the

charism. Others spoke of communication by example and by subtle expectation. Still another spoke of enduring affection, almost unconditional love. The spirit of the Sacred Heart, they said, creates a common bond – tangible, empowering, open-minded, steadfast.

Certain themes were repeatedly cited concerning the nature of the Sacred Heart heritage as respondents to the survey felt this heritage impacted their lives; I will touch upon seven categories which they highlighted.

Spirituality: gratitude for God’s personal love and for the caring and deep affection from RSCJ and from other Sacred Heart alums; witness of prayer life and recognition that Christ’s love lives as we live the heritage;

Generosity, Commitment, Service: total dedication to the task at hand; giving to others the gifts received; awareness of the world, its trends and its needs; the importance of influencing others for good, one by one – spouse, children, friends, neighbors, associations, – all geared to improving the human condition for the billions around the world, all of whom are God’s people;

Empowerment: instilling self-respect and self-confidence, being “happy with one’s self,” and working to empower others; ability to take leadership in large or small ways, to make a difference, to implement change;

Excellence: intellectual breadth and depth; fostering of responsibility for solid principles and values, for high standards and goals;

Respect for others: all are God’s creations and God’s presence in the world and should be treated with the courtesy and caring which acknowledge God’s continuing life in us;

Discipline: order in life, without which there is little ability to function; the importance of beauty, which comes through order, harmony, truth;

Internationality: the increasing significance of inclusion, of acceptance and celebration of diversity.

Where much has been given, much is expected. I said earlier, and I say it again, that “What Is It We Are Claiming?” could be a self-indulgent question. Implicit in the question is an obligation to the future. I give you again this challenge: we have a duty – or, even stronger, a mandate – to pass along what we have received; we are accountable to those who came before us and answerable to those who come after us.

The turn of the century brings us the two hundredth anniversary of God’s gift to St. Madeleine Sophie Barat of the charism and spirit of the Society of the Sacred Heart. This charism and spirit which she gave to us and which all of us transmit to others will remain the same, as it always has. But the expression of the spirit and charism will be different, both in our own country and around the world as the Society celebrates its internationality. Gifted with participation in the charism and spirit of the Society, Sacred Heart alumnae and alumni are called to be leaders for tomorrow as they have been for today and yesterday – by the depth of their personal lives with God, and by witnessing to that inner life in all their efforts to communicate what they have received through the Sacred Heart heritage. I leave you with the message of hope expressed in the words from St. John’s Gospel which Reverend Mother Rosalie Hill gave as a motto to the former College for Women of the University of San Diego: “That they may all be one.” There can be no finer expression of the “common bond” which characterises the Sacred Heart heritage.

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