Formation of the heart: growing in faith as a Catholic headteacher

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Let's start with a story. There were two disciples on the road to Emmaus. Nobody is really sure where that was. Some think it was a Roman spa town, a kind of Las Vegas of the classical world. But they don't sound like they're on their way to Las Vegas. It's maybe more important to think about where they're coming *from*: Jerusalem, the holy city. What they're walking away from is their hope, which died with the failed messiah hanging on a gibbet outside the city walls. They are talking about what happened, but not agreeing, the Greek word used is *antiballete (*Lk 24:17), which is where we get "ballistic" from. They're throwing it back and forward. They're having a row.

One is called Cleopas, we don't know the name of the other. Some have speculated that this is Cleopas' wife, who, unlike Cleopas, was at the foot of the cross. This would have made for an interesting "*antiballete*" – *so where were you then, Cleopas, when we needed you*? Others have suggested that St. Luke leaves the identity blank intentionally, as in *N*., so that for "name" we can insert ourselves in the story. Any disciple might see themselves in this story, walking away from what looked like a disaster, rowing about what it all meant.

Then they are interrupted, which is when the good news starts for them, but they don't get it for a while. They don't 'see' properly, they don't recognise Jesus, but they know he's not from 'round here' – Cleopas calls him *paroikeis* (24:18), which is stranger, or in the Old Testament, a resident alien. Maybe it was the Galilean accent he heard. Cleopas was closer to the truth than he realised. From the beginning, Jesus was an outsider, with no place "in the inn" (Luke 2:7) and he was executed "outside the city gate" (Hebrews 13:12), which is where we will for ever find him, and find ourselves.

At the invitation of Jesus – "What things?" (24:19) - Cleopas and his companion begin to show Jesus just how far off the mark they are, by rehearsing their dashed hopes in the

wrong kind of messiah. Even the astounding news that the women have reported an empty tomb did not stop them in their tracks on the road to nowhere. No-one is converted by an empty tomb. Jesus is exasperated that they are not getting this, he calls them "slow of heart" (24:25) because they haven't interpreted the prophets correctly. So he helps them. In one of the most famous seminars in history Jesus, our Teacher, takes them through the scriptures to make it clear that self-emptying was the route to redemption. If only they had taken notes! Our lives might have been so much easier, but that is not the point here. The point is coming.

At the end of the seminar, as they come near the village, Jesus walked ahead, "as if he were going on" (24:28). In scripture, a theophany (showing of God) happens in passing, as YHWH passed by Moses in the cleft of the rock (Ex 33:22) and he only saw him from behind. We'll never fully capture this God, he is always in some sense ahead of us, more than us, but never far away. The two disciples utter the sad cry of disciples in every age, "stay with us" (24:29). And that invitation is always answered, God always stays. In fact, it is the Holy Spirit which prompts the cry in the first place, "our desire to thank you is itself your gift" as it says in the Preface of the Mass. It is the cry of faith, and shows the trust and openness which are the prerequisite of being disciples.

So Jesus stays with them and then we have the final part of the revelation, at table, where revelation often happens in Luke's gospel. Jesus does what he did at the last supper, what he did with his life, what his disciples are called to do with their lives: he took, blessed, broke and gave. In that moment of sacrificial giving they recognise him, because that is who he is, that is what he does. Then he is gone, but not gone, since he will forever be present in the Eucharist, in the word, wherever anybody is giving themselves away in love. Now they 'see' what being a disciple is all about, the arsonist of the heart has struck. Their hearts, their spiritual centres, are on fire, no longer dimmed and slow. They're on the same page now. They "got up" (24:33), in other words they participate in the resurrection, which for the disciples is participating in the fullness of the Spirit that Jesus revealed, who now stays with the Church.

So they go back, we go back, from the perennial temptation to get it wrong, to lose hope, to head off in the wrong direction. We head back to Jerusalem, which is where Jesus was always headed in Luke's gospel. There we find the Church, the community, the Apostolic A-

team, the ones who *confirm* that what we're talking about is true, not eccentric, not something we dreamt up. And this community is sustained by what the disciples encountered on the road to Emmaus, the word and body of the Lord, given lovingly as food for the life of the world.

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This story has most of the elements of what we would call formation. It's about being interrupted on the road by one who is going to turn us around, re-interpret us, inspire us, accompany us. We will reach out in faith to this loving friend on the road, who will go from being the guest to being the host, who will remind us that, no matter how often we lose heart, we're loved, forgiven and made right with God. We're called to take part in a new creation, a new humanity, which finds itself in giving itself away for others, especially those on the margins, holding on to the edges. The Church is the community that is the sign of this new way of being and belonging, flawed as it is, deeply flawed at times, but never abandoned by the Lord. It is in this community that we grow in this new life, this participation in the life of God.

This story is also about the heart. In Jewish thought, the human being is conceived as a unity, an animated body, as opposed to an incarnate spirit, which is more in line with Greek thought. The Hebrew word "nefesh" was "person" or "self" – a "living being" (Gen 2.8). When "nefesh" was translated into Greek as "soul", it was an idea which was foreign to the Old Testament. There was no body/spirit dualism in Old Testament thinking. There was a person, animated by God, and the emotional, intellectual and moral centre of that person was the "heart", a word which occurs over 1000 times in the Bible. The heart thinks, as well as feels, as well as makes choices. The heart is our moral and spiritual core.

This is where the Lord looks. As the prophet Samuel said, mortals look at outward appearances, but the Lord does not see as we see, "the Lord looks on the heart" (1 Sam 16: 7). When hearts are 'hardened' then relations with God and neighbour are closed off. The law of Moses warned against this: "If there is a poor man with you, one of your brothers…you shall not harden your heart" (Deut 15:7). Our hearts have a homing device, a truth deep within them. St Augustine said, we are made for God and our hearts will be restless until they rest in Him.

In the Sermon on the Mount, it is the "pure in heart" (Mt 5:8) who will see God, not those with hearts full of anger and the need to dominate and possess. For Jesus, what you really value will determine the state of your heart. He teaches that if you want to know what someone's heart is like, look in their treasure box. "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Mt 6:21). St. Luke in his version of the parable of the sower says that the ones in whom the word finds good soil are those who hear the word and "hold it fast in an honest and good heart" (Luke 8: 15). John Cassian, the fifth century monk and student of the Desert Fathers, spoke of the need for "daily and hourly turning up the ground of our heart with the gospel plough" (Conferences 1.9) as a way of growing in faith. Our hearts need to be 'turned over' by the Gospel, made open and receptive and vulnerable.

Catholics of a certain vintage may be more familiar with a focus on the "soul" as the priority. The word formation wasn't very widely used either until recently. The focus, as the Council of Trent made clear, was the "salvation of souls" and the protection of the faithful from heresy. In an age of reformation this was understandable. The soul of course is still a very important part of our thinking, but we have also retrieved the older usage of heart as the spiritual centre. We see this in the 2007 document from the Congregation for Catholic Education which says that "Catholic educators need a 'formation of the heart': they need to be led to that encounter with God in Christ which awakens their love and opens their spirits to others, so that their educational commitment becomes a consequence deriving from their faith, a faith which becomes active through love (cf. Gal 5:6)" (*Educating Together in Catholic Schools*, 25).

Here we find some of the "major chords" we have so far identified in any approach to formation: an encounter with God in Christ which awakens love and opens the spirit to others, so that in the case of Catholic teachers and headteachers our work becomes an expression of our faith. Which brings us on to the more practical question of how this formation can be achieved, what does it consist of, how do we know when it's happening? As we saw in the Road to Emmaus, we're talking about a change in the person, a transformation, from being a cold grate to being on fire. When Jesus announces the kingdom of God in Mark's gospel he says, "repent" (Mark 1:15). The Greek word is *metanoeite* which means change your mind, or change your inner person.

So we're talking about a change from one state to another, a progressive change, a journey over a lifetime, a process of growing up spiritually. The Council of Trent talked about a "translation" from being a child of the first Adam "to the state of grace and the adoption of the sons of God through the second Adam, Jesus Christ" (Sixth Session on Justification, Ch. IV). It goes on to talk about being "born again" in baptism. The document makes it clear that this is not something we can achieve through any merit on our part. It is the "predisposing grace of God" which prompts us towards right relations. God calls, God "touches the heart" but we need to co-operate. It is by our faith, the trust of an open heart, that we can be transformed by grace. So the questions at the outset might be, are you the person you think you should be? How can you become that person?

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In his first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est* (God is Love), Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI memorably stated that "being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction" (DSE, 1). How then do we encounter this event, this person that is at the centre of our faith? In a document on adult formation published in 1999, the Bishops of England and Wales said that the Church encounters God in four ways: "In scripture, liturgy, life and prayer." That seems to me to provide helpful co-ordinates for anybody who's thinking about formation in the Christian life. In the time we have today, I'd like to stay with scripture.

In the scriptures we encounter the Word of God made flesh and He encounters us. He has come looking for us. There are some commentators who talk about the bible as the story of our search for God. I prefer the view that it's more about God's search for us. It's there all the way through the bible, from the moment we see God in the garden of Eden, calling out to Adam and Eve, "where are you?" This is a painful question, because at that moment they don't know where they are, they've lost confidence in their relationship with God. Before they leave the garden – that state of communion with God – God made garments for them, he "clothed them" (Gen 3: 21). We've been wrapped in that divine care ever since, although it often slips our mind.

The gospels are filled with encounters between real people – often from the margins of their society – and Jesus, the Word made flesh. Since our interest is in leadership, let's look

for a moment at the one who is called to a leadership role, Simon Peter, the brother of Andrew. In Luke's gospel, it's clear that Peter does not go looking for Jesus. He is minding his own business, seeing to his trade as a fisherman on the banks of the Sea of Galilee. Peter's journey of discipleship started when Jesus stepped into his boat (Luke 5: 3). In a phrase which challenges everybody who'd rather have a comfortable life, Jesus says to Peter, "Put out into the deep" (Luke 5: 4). When they haul in the miraculous catch of fish, Peter knows that something life-changing is happening and it scares him. His response is the same as most prophets in the bible when they're called: please find somebody else. "Go away from me from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man" (Luke 5:8). Jesus says what God always says to scared humans, "Do not be afraid" (Luke 5:10). It's a good message for everybody in leadership in the church, especially in education during this most difficult and demanding time. Do not be afraid, I'll show you what to do. And they left everything and followed him.

Peter and the apostles don't always seem to get the point of what is going on and that is confirmed at the last supper in Luke's gospel, when after all that time with Jesus, when his enemies are circling, when it all seems to be falling apart, what are they arguing about? *Who is the greatest?* Jesus delivers one of the final lessons of his earthly life on leadership. His disciples are not to lord it over anybody but to be "like one who serves" (Luke 22:26), since Jesus is among us "as one who serves" (Luke 22: 27). I've often thought about what servant leadership means for Catholic headteachers. Can you be a good headteacher and a servant leader at the same time? If you're washing everybody's feet, is there a danger that they'll walk all over you?

We might get some help with this in an episode at the end of John's gospel. After the resurrection, Jesus appears to his disciples on the shore of the lake. Just as Peter had denied Jesus three times on the eve of his death, so now he is given three opportunities to know he is forgiven. Jesus asks him, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these" (John 21: 15). The Greek word for love which Jesus uses is *agape*. The Christian community soon abandoned all the other Greek words used for love – *eros, storge, phileo* – and settled on *agape* – a word for a new understanding of love that needed to apply not just to our family, our neighbour, but to all the world, even our enemy. This wasn't just a feeling, this was a deliberate policy of life involving heart, head and hands. This was the kind of love Jesus had shown all the way to the cross.

Peter answers Jesus, “Yes Lord, you know that I love you” (John 21: 15) but Peter uses the word *phileo* for love, which is more like affectionate friendship, to cherish someone, not quite the *agape* Jesus was asking for. Jesus asks again, Peter do you *agape* me? Again, Peter replies, Lord you know that I *phileo* you. Then very movingly, when Jesus asks Peter a third time, to finally erase the third denial, he says to him, “Simon son of John, do you *phileo* me?” It’s as if Jesus acknowledges that right now that’s the best that Peter can offer, but he is on a journey which will end in martyrdom, when Peter finally shows *agape* for his Lord. But it will take time, the journey of a lifetime. When Peter’s all too human love for the Lord has been established then he is confirmed in his leadership role, which is pastoral, “Feed my sheep” (John 21:17). Leadership in the church is founded on love and service, not lording it over or dominating.

How does this work in a school, when you still have to deal with the worldly structures of accountability, teacher performance, exam results and inspections? Is there any difference between how a Catholic headteacher approaches these things and the one who is not? Well there should be, and the difference is what fuels your leadership. Pope Francis, in his most recent encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti* , says that, “for us the wellspring of human dignity and fraternity is in the Gospel of Jesus Christ” (FT, 227). From that source arises for Christians the primacy given to relationships, to what he calls “the encounter with the sacred mystery of the other” (FT, 227).

You still need to deal with the teacher who is letting the children down but you go about this with compassion, compassionate professionalism, while holding on to the vision that a loving culture is one in which young people flourish and young people do not flourish in a confused and chaotic classroom. There will still be still difficult conversations: tomorrow, this week, this term, but you’ll have the grace to carry them out for the right reason, with compassion, but also justice, being fair, gathering the evidence, doing what is right by the person in front of you, for the good of the school and the best possible education for the pupils.

Scripture is one of the pillars of formation for any Catholic headteacher. Catholics lost touch with scripture for many years. My parents were formed in the Catholic faith in a working-class community on the west coast of Scotland in the 1930s, 40s and 50s. When they went to Mass, they didn’t hear the gospel. It was in Latin. They didn’t have missals, they had

devotional books. Vatican II was an invitation to the church to get to know the scriptures again. The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, known by the first two words of its Latin version, *Dei Verbum*, reminds us of what was revealed in the Emmaus story, that we receive 'the bread of life from the table both of the word of God and of the Body of Christ' (*Dei Verbum* 21).

In 2005, the Bishops conferences of Scotland, England and Wales published a joint teaching document, *The Gift of Scripture*, to mark the 40th anniversary of *Dei Verbum*. It could be a good place to start for any of you who are looking to re-animate a love of sacred scripture which *Dei Verbum* calls, "food of the soul" (*Dei Verbum*, 21). A few years ago, I interviewed a Catholic headteacher in an inner-city school in England as part of my research for a book on leadership. I didn't ask her about her spiritual life, but unbidden she told me:

"I get up half an hour early every day at 5.30 am so that I can pray and I use an online resource called Sacred Space (www.sacredspace.ie). It's been my lifeline as a headteacher. The reading this morning was all about the bread of life and it was wonderful because as a headteacher you get those days when you think 'I haven't got a clue. I wish somebody had given me a map when I started this because what on earth am I doing' and the contemplation that went with it was to the effect that God is always looking after you and nurturing you."

She was so honest. Right up to the end of my time in headship there was days when I felt I still didn't have a clue. I was much less committed than she was to the daily discipline of spiritual life. I was a Catholic headteacher for 14 years and there were many times when I was 'too busy to bow down', too stressed and preoccupied to even think about a spiritual life and it's only looking back that I made the connection. I was at my most stressed when I was paying least attention to my spiritual life. When I started to make time for scripture and prayer it didn't make the problems go away but I certainly felt more grounded, more secure, more at ease, more able to deal with whatever came through those gates.

The *Gift of Scripture* document recommends that people return to *Lectio Divina*, the ancient way of prayerfully reading the scriptures which has become popular again. I discovered it about ten years ago, when I had a connection with a local Benedictine monastery. I went to some workshops on Lectio and was hooked. The method, for those who aren't familiar with

it, involves an individual or a group approaching a passage of scripture in four stages: *Lectio – Meditatio – Oratio – Contemplatio*. Some add a fifth stage, *Actio*.

Lectio. Begin your Lectio with a brief prayer to the Holy Spirit, asking for guidance and discernment. Read the passage of scripture slowly. In a group it works well to have different voices reading sections. On your own, writing out the passage by hand is a good way to read slowly, as is reading aloud. In the ancient world, people always read 'out loud', there was no silent reading. The main point is to take your time. Too much of our reading in leadership is to consume information, daily briefings. We've lost the ability to read well, read slowly, read prayerfully.

Meditatio. Allow some silence to let the words settle in your heart. In our busy lives we're very twitchy about silence, sometimes even afraid of silence. But we need good soil to receive the word of God. An attentive silent heart is good soil. Very often a word or phrase or image will speak to us with particular force. The word of God is personal, it speaks to us. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, in his exhortation *Verbum Domini*, said, "The word of God is living and addressed to each of us in the here and now of our lives." What is the scripture saying to me today, in my life? How is God working on my imagination, on my choices, on my determination to change? Some people like to keep a record of their thoughts in a journal. In a group lectio, after a period of silence you can invite people to share a phrase or word that spoke to them, this is known as 'echoes', and then the group can move on to share insights and comments, but not as a discussion, or an argument. It's not an "antiballete".

Oratio. This is our prayer, what we are saying to God, from the depths of our hearts. In a group, people are invited to share their spontaneous prayers if they wish, ending, *Lord in your mercy*…

Contemplatio. This is known as 'resting in God', not trying to think of anything but maintaining silence, no thoughts, to allow the deeper work of the Spirit to take place. St John of the Cross said that God's first language was silence, all the rest is a poor translation. After a suitable length of time the session can be concluded with an Our Father and an invocation to the saint of the day.

Actio, which coms later and is private, is any resolution to act which has been inspired by the word of God, any small steps in the spiritual life I could take, any adjustments to my lifestyle which are overdue, any attention I could pay my neighbour.

I once suggested that we might try Lectio Divina at the beginning of our local Catholic headteacher meetings. Since it was going to take about twenty minutes, we made it voluntary. Everybody came, and it became a regular feature of our meetings. We chose the gospel for the forthcoming Sunday which always spoke to me more deeply on the Sunday having reflected on it earlier in the week. We also had a voluntary staff group in school that met once a week in Lent. We never got as far as having student groups, but I know of many schools that have and it works very well. My current favourite way to access the scriptures daily is to use the app *Prayasugo*, developed by the Jesuits. It's a 10-15 minute reflection on one of the readings of the day, often with beautifully presented music. It's an ideal way to start the day.

So I'm suggesting that a key part of your formation as Catholic leaders is to let the word of God get to work on your heart, making it more open, more receptive to the good news and how you might play your part in building up the kingdom. Pope Francis begins *Fratelli Tutti* by lamenting the "culture of walls" (FT, 27) in our society, the attitude that springs from a hardened heart that only looks out for my needs, or the needs of my group, keeping the rest out, especially if they are needy and might be a drain on my resources. He calls on Christians to "rediscover our vocation as citizens of the entire world, builders of a new social bond" (FT, 66). This is nothing less than our destiny as human beings, since "we are created for a fulfilment that can only be found in love" (FT, 66). Back to that *agape* we talked about earlier. This love is only made possible by God's grace, as the Council of Trent said. We do not earn this love, we just need to be open to it, in faith, to surrender to it. When God's love starts to flow through our hearts then it flows outwards. It's never just for us. It's always a "movement outward toward another to seek their good" (FT, 93).

Pope Francis calls this solidarity, which for him is a moral virtue and a social attitude. This solidarity finds concrete expression in service, in serving people, especially in "caring for vulnerability" (FT, 115). But it's not just about works of mercy, not just about alleviating poverty and misery. The Holy Father is very clear that solidarity means "combatting the structural causes of poverty and inequality" (FT, 116). There is an exciting challenge here for

us as Catholic educators. We are called to form 'agents of change' – young people who become skilled in understanding how inequality works and have a heart to change it, to build what he calls "a new humanity" (FT, 127). This involves calling out the lies of those with a vested interest in keeping the system as it is. He says that "we need to unmask the various ways that the truth is manipulated, distorted and concealed in public and private discourse" (FT, 208).

There is a challenge for us here too. It's not just about assuming that all the lies and hostility are over there, in that lot. In his first encyclical, *Laudato Si*, the Holy Father invited us to look at our own lifestyles and choices and consider how much of what we enjoy is only possible because it cannot be universalised. If everybody on the planet consumed as much fuel and food and fabric as we do, the planet would not cope. We are 'first world' Catholics, used to a certain lifestyle which is now being called into question. We live in the empire of money, the empire of things and, as the Jewish writer and teacher Abraham Heschel said, "Things, when magnified, are forgeries of happiness" (*Sabbath*, p. 6). We're invited to look into our own treasure boxes. What do we find there? Where do we go for our security? What are our actual, operative values? To what extent are our hearts infected by the virus of consumerism, or racism, the bind racism of the privilege we take for granted?

Formation of the heart is not a project we're in charge of. It is the Holy Spirit who is at work on our imagination, trying to stretch our hearts, unsettle our settled habits, expose our complicity with injustice. Our job is to co-operate, to accept the gift of faith that allows our hearts to be open and trusting, to be good soil for the word of God. Through our spiritual practices – the Eucharist, source and summit of our faith - prayer, scripture, and in our life, in our relationships with each other and with nature – we grow in faith, hope and love. Our faith is the 'gateway' to the good news and by God's grace we grow in hope and love, a love which finds concrete expression in the ways we give ourselves away for the sake of our most vulnerable brothers and sisters; and work towards the changes which mean that nobody is reduced to poverty or trapped in exclusion. It is a joyful undertaking, which gives meaning, purpose and relish to human existence.

Let's finish with a prayer by St Thomas Aquinas.

Give us, Lord, a steady heart

Which no unworthy liking may drag down.

Give us an unconquered heart

Which no trouble can wear out.

Give us an upright heart

Which no unworthy purpose may turn aside.

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