

**Mary Frohlich. *The Heart at the Heart of the World: Re-visioning the Sacred Heart for the Ecozoic Era*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2024, 256 pp. ISBN: 9781626985629 (paperback)**

What does the Catholic devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus have to do with ecology? In *The Heart at the Heart of the World: Re-visioning the Sacred Heart for the Ecozoic Era*, Mary Frohlich emphasizes the significance of our relationship with the environment and the relevance of this traditional devotion to the pressing contemporary ecological and environmental crisis. The Catholic devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, a symbol of God's boundless love for humanity with roots in scripture and theological reflection, gained widespread popularity in France in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Some of the tenets of this devotion involve consecrating oneself to the Sacred Heart, embracing God's merciful love, returning love with gratitude, and making amends or reparation for offenses against God. This devotion has waned, as Frohlich acknowledges. However, she sees in this spirituality a fresh perspective, offering much to inspire us to foster mindfulness about our dynamic web of mutually beneficial and interconnected relationships with the natural world and our call to safeguard and collaborate with God's creation to survive and thrive.

But why the Sacred Heart? Before exploring the meaning and theology of the Sacred Heart more deeply, Frohlich discusses the human heart as an expression of a person's depth, wholeness, love, emotion, and interior life. In her discussion of the heart's vulnerability, Frohlich emphasizes our interpersonal and social relationships with others and our susceptibility to grief and woundedness. She also discusses the four functions of the heart in human life: interiority, bonding, belonging, and meaning. Interiority refers to a safe space where we retreat for reflection and rest. Bonding is the place of the heart in offering and receiving love and tenderness. Belonging is the desire to connect and care for ourselves and others through committed participation. Meaning is the investment into making the world a better place.

Devotion to the Sacred Heart can be traced back to the early times of the Church. Readers will find Frohlich's historical survey of references and devotion to the Heart of Jesus within the Christian tradition from the first five centuries to the medieval period in Europe to seventeenth-century France and the twenty-first century. Frohlich highlights stories about the Heart of Christ in each historical period as expressed and theologized by influential spiritual figures, e.g., Origen (185-253), Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), Gertrude of Helfta (1256-1302), Jean Eudes (1601-1680), Marguerite Marie Alacoque (1647-1690), and Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955). Teilhard de Chardin, for example, identified the Sacred Heart as an "Omega Point" or "the heart of matter and of the physical cosmos" (p.

37). It is “an attractive force of infinite divine love that is constantly at work in the created world to lure it towards its ‘pleroma’ or fullness of life” (p. 36).

As revealed in the Sacred Heart, God’s boundless and passionate love invites us to respond to love with love, not only for human beings but also for all of God’s creation. A challenge found in modern life is our disconnection with the Earth, which Frohlich calls the “Earth-separated life.” In the controlled environment of our home, we are shielded from direct interaction with the natural cycles of air, soil, water, and diverse living organisms. Our food is purchased or delivered in containers and bags (p. 46). Frohlich describes the effects of our consumerist and Earth-separated lives on our spiritual, emotional, and physical well-being. She highlights efforts we can take to reclaim and rediscover our relationship with the Earth and within the community of Earth creatures. One such effort is a new way of recognizing and understanding the kingdom of God. Frohlich asserts that Jesus’s core preaching about the *kingdom* of God can be expressed today as the *kindom* of God, in which all life is our kin and is interconnected and interdependent. Our vocation is to “live faithfully the life of kinship” within this web of created beings (p. 177).

God’s *kindom* is not like a “well-ordered nursery,” as we imagine, but rather “wild” and “queer.” By wild, she means the diverse web of creatures, and every one of them is an object of God’s tender love. She writes, “[The] fact that wild creatures, from viruses to rats to sharks, may at times be inconvenient or even life-threatening for human beings does not detract from their being equally members of the *kindom* that God has created and longs to accompany into the fullness of life” (p. 97). Queer, on the other hand, refers to a way of rejecting all culturally imposed binaries, e.g., male/female, for humans and animals. She emphasizes that God and the created world do not adhere to binary, heteronormative expectations. God’s radical love breaks all boundaries.

God’s radical love exists eternally. The Sacred Heart does not begin at Christ’s incarnation but has been at the heart of the world since the beginning of creation, from the emergence of the universe to the emergence of the galaxies and solar system to the emergence of all life forms. Jesus was incarnated “to reconcile all things to God” and “to complete the manifestation of God’s Living Heart on Earth” (p. 88). Jesus’s death on the cross is the ultimate complete giving of himself to others so that they may have life.

The pierced side of Christ, or “Pierced Heart” as traditionally understood, expresses divine compassion for our brokenness or “sacred wound” that is cosmic in nature. God’s love and tenderness for humanity and creation heal this cosmic, sacred wound. Being wounded is unavoidable but can lead us to wholeness and holiness (p. 189). It can goad us into reparation, a traditional Sacred Heart practice of “penitential suffering to make up for the dishonor suffered by God” (p. 213). However, in our context, according to Frohlich, reparation can be done through forming people of good and moral character, participating in ecological

restoration, ritualizing our acts of building community with the more-than-human world, and opening the eyes of our hearts to recognize the beauty and wholeness of the Earth.

Given the current global reality of catastrophic, ecological degradation and Pope Francis' recently issued encyclical on the Sacred Heart, *Dilexit Nos* ("He loved us"), the book is a timely contribution to the discussion and reflection on the environmental crisis, self-giving love, and our deep relationality with the Earth. Through the lens of Sacred Heart devotion, Frohlich writes to incite an eco-spiritual awakening experience that can inspire a shift of assumptions from anthropocentrism toward naturecentrism, in which human beings are a humble species that is part of a larger fabric of coexistence and ecosystem. The universe and planet Earth have existed for billions of years, and we humans are latecomers. Yet, in a short time, we have contributed much to the destruction of the Earth. Thus, Frohlich offers "an evocative and inspiring vision," inviting readers to experience God's love in and through nature and challenging them to live "heartfully" as kin within the interdependent community of living beings and delve deeper into understanding the rootedness of human affairs in the planet's geological and biological systems.

Frohlich claims in the introduction that this is not an academic book. What she writes comes from her heart. Throughout the book, she interacts with modern scholarship on ecology and theology and shares her experiences connected to the points/themes discussed, making her writing engaging and relatable. For example, in her explanation of creation and God's involvement, she acknowledges our need to respect science but emphasizes that God cannot be reduced only to its findings (p. 76). She rejects the notion of an interventionist God who intervenes in the created world to accomplish things apart from natural processes. Instead, she embraces the concept that divine intentionality directs the evolution and emergence processes (p. 77). She interprets the "Big Bang" theory as the "exploding forth of the vast fountain of divine love from the Heart of God" (p. 80).

The book is written in an accessible and intriguing style for a diverse readership. Readers will appreciate Frohlich's meticulous attention to Christian (Catholic) terminologies, providing necessary details to help unfamiliar readers. Each chapter concludes with statements and questions for reflection to help readers contemplate the sacred and our spiritual relationship with God and with the Earth. Furthermore, the suggested readings listed at the end of each chapter invite readers to delve deeper into the subject matter. *The Heart at the Heart of the World: Revisioning the Sacred Heart for the Ecozoic Era* offers a heartfelt, thought-provoking, and stimulating reading experience.

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