

The Sacred Heart of Jesus

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I recently received a gift from one of the members of the Bromley FFWPU Community. This member suffers from chronic mental illness which interferes with her ability to relate socially, and while she can be quite delusional, she's relatively harmless when her mood is good. Her participation in the community's worship services is quite infrequent, but on the rare occasion she visits it's not unusual for her to give me gifts for me or my family members. In the past this has included soft toys, chocolates or other food items. On this occasion, her present was something rather unusual: a polyester cloth printed with an image of the sacred heart of Jesus.



Jesus in my office

This was no small cloth, however. It was the size of a flag, maybe A1 size, about a metre in height. Unfolded, it was quite imposing, and the picture itself could be quite alarming if one were not familiar with the image; the stuff of childhood nightmares, perhaps. My wife – rather unsurprisingly – wasn't too keen on it. A dozen years ago, I too would have probably expressed hesitation towards it. Strangely, however, when I first set eyes on the unfurled fabric poster I felt drawn to something within it. I expressed my enamourment to my wife and suggested that we hang it up somewhere. With my wife reluctant to have it on display in the home, I decided Jesus would be very welcome to take up a space on a wall in my office (which is actually a glorified shed in my garden). So there he has proudly remained ever since.

What I appreciate in this depiction of Jesus is the emphasis on his heart. If one goes beyond the kitsch nature of this fanciful (and rather European-looking) portrait, the focus is clearly the sacred heart of Jesus, something revealed by Jesus through visions to the 17th century nun, Saint Margaret Mary Alacoque. Rather than dwelling on any other aspect of Jesus' life, death or ministry, the object of devotion is intended to be the heart of Jesus, his *shimjeong* (심정) as it would be

described in Korean. The idea of *shimjeong* is powerfully important in the teachings of the Unification Movement, so the idea of Jesus' *shimjeong* is something worth reflecting on.



Someone who has attempted a fictional treatment of the sacred heart of Jesus is Peter Chavier, in his novel *Tears of Jesus: The Secret of the Cross Immolation Syndrome*. Writing under a pen name, this Japanese author tells the story of Father Yamamoto, a Japanese Catholic priest undergoing a Vatican-sponsored ecumenical investigation into unusual behaviour towards the crucifix. Less adventurous than *The Da Vinci Code*, yet certainly more credible, this novel invites the reader to prayerfully reflect not only on how Jesus felt 2000 years ago but also on how Jesus feels now. The characters are convincing and their development throughout the novel guides the reader through their own self-development. I dare argue that this novel has the potential to revitalise, if not transform, one's relationship with the living spirit of Jesus.

That's not to say that this book is without flaws. I read an English translation of this book; it was originally composed in Japanese. I haven't read any other direct translations of Japanese literature into English, so it's difficult to objectively evaluate the style of this work,

but I must admit I did find the narrative voice and much of the dialogue clumsy. Some parts of the story read more like a history textbook of Christian (in particular, Catholic) theology. While I have an interest in those areas and found such sections instructively engaging, I wonder if such passages would fail to capture the attention of other readers? Many of the names used in the novel are references to actual figures in 20th Century Catholic philosophy & theology, such as Rahner, Schillebeeckx and Balthasar. Was this an intentional homage to such theologians? Or did the author simply lack imagination with respect to naming his story's characters? The jury's out, but my less cynical side wishes that the former is true. My overall point is, however, that as a body of literature this book has stylistic problems. Perhaps this was due to translational limitations, but it certainly detracted from my experience of reading the story.

But if one can suspend one's frustrations with the delivery of the story – as indeed I did – the core content

of the story is quite moving and even exciting. I felt my relationship with Jesus growing as I shared the journey of the story's protagonists. I was tearfully moved by the twists and turns of the story, which is a considerable achievement considering how nonchalant and cynical I can be. The merit of this novel is in the storytelling. I would recommend this novel as a spiritual exercise, to be read with an open mind and heart and with the goal of spiritual growth. I believe with that kind of prepared heart, the book will not fail to move.

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<http://www.amazon.com/Tears-Jesus-Secret-Immolation-Syndrome-ebook/dp/B006ZTHT86>