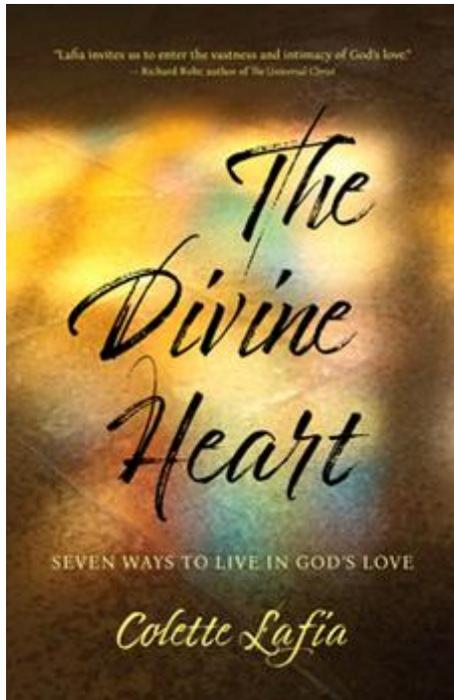


The Divine Heart: Seven Ways to Live in God's Love

A Book Review by Fr. John Coleman, S.J.



Colette Lafia is probably well known to members of Saint Ignatius Parish. Over the years she has done a number of excellent adult faith formation talks for the parish on topics of spirituality. She is an active spiritual director and also does talks on spirituality at Mercy Center in Burlingame. Lafia asked me if I would do a review of her recent book, The Divine Heart: Seven Ways to Live in God's Love (Monkfish Book Publishing Company, 2021 162 pp.)

It is a wonderful book, full not only of talk about prayer but many suggestions of how to pray. It deserves not only to be read widely but also to be read prayerfully and slowly. In her prologue she reminds us that learning to love is our human mission, one we're all in together.

We are called to love and let God's love for us guide us. In Part I, entitled Beginnings, Lafia reminds us, citing John of the Cross, that Divine Love is the template and model of all

human love and human love is the necessary school and preparation for any transcendent encounter.

God is in fact a love relationship. As our intimacy with the divine grows, so does a more intimate relation with ourselves, others, nature and art.

In Part Two, Lafia introduces us to seven ways of inviting divine love into our life: (1) Receptivity; (2) Delight; (3) Expansiveness; (4) Acceptance; (5) Vulnerability; (6) Mystery; (7) Gratitude. The book suggests concrete ways to pray and also suggests keeping a journal. She also notes that it is good to begin each session with a ritual of prayer.

The First Initiation for prayer involves Receptivity. It notes that giving is the true and worthy response to first receiving. The love we give to others is love we have received from God. Also, listening is very important—listening to God. She presents a Heart prayer and suggests we take a listening walk. I actually tried to follow the advice of a listening walk on my Friday afternoon walk—listening to the wind, to birds, to things that come spontaneously during such a walk.

The second initiation she speaks of is: Delight, Savoring each moment. She cites Rumi, the Moslem mystic that "Every being is a jar full of delight". Actually, throughout the book, Lafia cites many mystics such as Teresa of Avila, Augustine, Thomas Merton, Julian of Norwich, Catherine of Sienna, Hildegard of Bingen. These citations add texture and richness to her own

reflections. She suggests that we use seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, tasting exercises to help us become more playful and to see that we are God's wonder. She offers a way of using such a seeing prayer and also a savoring prayer.

The third initiation involves Expansiveness. It calls us to trust our heart's capacity. Our heart means our whole being. It also allows us to seek the guidance of the spirit. Our heart expands with trust. Important in this process is to embrace gentleness and look for ways of expressing that gentleness in our daily lives. As Saint Paul saw it, gentleness was the sixth fruit of the Spirit. Love is an experience, not just an idea. So, again, Lafia gives us examples of using spiritual journaling and offers concrete examples for prayers and practices. We need to ask how God is calling me (here and now) and to say back to God: Here I am.

The fourth initiation calls for Acceptance: Embracing Life and Who We Are. We need to come to grips with and see the false self that too often emerges. Yet we also need to see our frailty. God loves us even when we do not accept our own limitations and who we are.

Somewhat related is the Fifth Initiation: Vulnerability. We need to take risks and let ourselves be seen, and we ask in prayer, "Where am I being called to say yes, and where am I called to say no." Lafia talks about issues with her mother when her mother was an alcoholic but later being able to embrace her mother and learn from her. She speaks about her love for her husband but also about financial issues that sometimes scare her.

The sixth initiation involves mystery—the mystery of love. We need to allow ourselves to accept some darkness and an unknowing in order to meet the mystery of God and God's love. We may not ever be able to define God and God's actions but we can experience them and revel in the mystery of God's love and of our lives. The seventh and final initiation takes us to gratitude. We come to see God as a gift. To experience this gratitude, we need some time of rest, we need thankfulness and the ability to relax in and enjoy the divine presence. Lafia, once again, presents ways to practice gratitude in prayer and our life. Part Three involves some brief reflections about Living Love and reminds us that to love others, we must first learn to love ourselves.

I agree with the remarks of James Finley, author of Merton's Palace of Nowhere, who says on the bookjacket: "A generous offering of insights and encouragement that lend themselves to pausing and resting in God's presence, a state of sustained attentiveness suffused with love. Colette Lafia includes a host of practical suggestions to help us carry this divine love into the graces and challenges of each day."