

Love to God and our Neighbor

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time (B) - Mk 12:28b-34

Ave Maria Catholic Church, October 31, 2021 - Fr. David M Vidal

There is perhaps no word that is misused more in our time than the word “love.” The word “love” is used in so many ways and in so many contradictory actions, that in the end, we really don’t know what love means. Now, there is something even more tragic; since people accept so many conflicting meanings of “love,” love becomes something horrible!

In this general confusion, even the straightforward sentence of St. Augustine: “*Love and do what you will*” is misused and twisted. Some people imagine that St. Augustine means: “*Love and do whatever you want;*” or “*If you do something with ‘love,’ then whatever it is, it’s okay.*”

Now, St. Augustine’s words, “*Love and do what you will,*” comes from St. Augustine’s Homily (7) on the First Letter of St. John, (1 John 4:4-12), that includes the verse: “*We love because God has loved us first.*” However, some do not want to admit that our love is and must be linked to the love of God.

According to some interpretations love is chemistry. Then, loving someone means to have a chemical reaction. It is only a message that is sent to the core memory center. If love is chemistry, then, it is not something we can necessarily control, or something about which we are responsible. At the base of this theory stands the conviction that we as human beings are not higher than a sophisticated chemical structure, and spirituality is nothing more than a myth.

According to other interpretations love is a drive. Like hunger, love is a drive. And human beings share these drives with the rest of the animal kingdom. Then we only feel emotions and passions. Love is part of a biological motivation system, or part of the brain’s reward system. Some sociological theories use this understanding of human relationships.

For example, Adam Smith (1790) places individual’s self-interest as the foundation of human relationships. Then, we give only with the interest of getting something back, and we work for our return and our own advantage.

A French philosopher, Jean Paul Sartre (1943) goes even further. He claims that we give in order to subjugate. In this way, we use human relationships just to subjugate others. For Sartre, our gifts are tools for dominion and power.

However, there is a higher understanding of love. Thomas Aquinas thinks that love can be both a passion and a virtue. In the modern world, we tend to think of love only as an emotion – something we “fall into,” something that “happens to us.” There is certainly love of this sort: love that we “feel” and sometimes feel very strongly. But it is important to

realize that true love has a greater foundation. This is the solid foundation of love as virtue. Here, love becomes not just a feeling we have, but a settled disposition that looks for the good of the other. This disposition leads us to sacrifice ourselves for the other, and to be compassionate and just.

What is this virtue of love?

The virtue of love is spiritual in nature. In the Christian's soul there is a new love by which he shares in God's own love: "*The love of God,*" says St. Paul, "*has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us,*" (Rom 5:5).

This love is divine in nature, and so, it is higher than the natural abilities of the human soul. In theological terminology it is called charity. This supernatural love plays a fundamental role in Christian life, as St. Thomas shows when he clearly emphasizes that charity is not only "*the noblest of all the virtues*" but is also "*the form of all the virtues, because through charity the acts [of all the other virtues] are ordered to God*" (II-II, q. 23, aa. 6 and 8).

Charity, therefore, is the central value of the new person, "*created in God's way in righteousness and holiness of truth*" (Eph 4:24; cf. Gal 3:27; Rom 13:14). If the Christian life is compared to a building under construction, it is easy to see that faith is the foundation of all the virtues. The Council of Trent teaches that "*faith is the beginning of human salvation, the foundation and source of all justification*" (cf. DS 2532). But union with God through faith has as its goal the union with God in the love of charity. Faith is the foundation of our building, but love is what completes our building and makes it perfect!

Obviously, this is not just any kind of love, but this is the love of God that has been poured out into our hearts.

According to this love, we are called to love God first: "*You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind,*" (Mt 22:34-40).

We must love him first, because we love things that are good, and God is the highest Good; because we love things that are beautiful, and God is most beautiful; because we love things that are true, and God is Truth himself; and because we love those who love us; and God loved us first, and he loved us so much that he sent his only Son to save us from sin and death, (John 3:16).

However, our love towards God does not exclude love towards our neighbor, because we must love both God and man. Today's gospel teaches us: "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself,*" (Mk 12:31). The love of God and the love of our neighbor are like "twin brothers" that look alike and share the same origin.

But there is more, we must understand this love toward our neighbor in light of Jesus's new commandment: "*Love one another, even as I have loved you,*" (Jn. 13:34).

It is easy to love those who love us and difficult to love those who don't. If we do not find people likeable, if they offend us and hurt us, how difficult it is to even think about the possibility of loving them! But if we love God with our whole heart, mind and soul, we can establish a new relationship with our neighbor. Our neighbor is not one more object in the world, but someone who in God's providence and love is right here, next to us, for our mutual sanctification and eternal happiness.

This is the love that has been poured out into our hearts. It is not a chemical reaction. It is not just a feeling or a natural drive. It is much greater and higher!

Jesus wants to lift our souls higher and higher, and for this reason, he tells us: "*You must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect,*" (Mt 5:48). That means we must love God not just a little, but much; we must not stop at the point at which we have arrived, but with God's help, we must progress in love, to the point that we love God with our whole heart, soul, mind, and strength, and our neighbor as Jesus loves us all.

Through the intercession of our Blessed Mother, let us ask for the grace to grow in the virtue of love. Amen.