

PRESENTATION ON THE VIRTUE OF LOVE

"In this is love, not that we have loved God, but that He has first loved us,

and sent His Son as the payment for our sins." 1 John 4:10

I. Love is the highest of the Christian virtues. It involves a recognition and celebration of the goodness of God above all, of other people as created in His image, and by implication of all of creation and showing forth His goodness.

A. The theme of love runs heavily throughout Scripture, with the greatest emphasis in: the Song of Songs, a poem about the love between a bride and groom that is an analogy of God's love for His people and for each person; Psalms 118 and 136, which celebrate God's enduring love; the Gospel according to John; and the first letter of John.

B. The notion that the love of God is the highest of commandments is clear from the Old Testament. Duet. 6:5. The book of Leviticus does also says that we should love our neighbor as ourselves, but that book alone does not give this commandment the emphasis that Jesus does. In addition, in Leviticus, that commandment applies basically to countrymen. Lev. 19:18. Jesus made it clear that the love of all other people flows from the love of God. See Matt. 22:34-39; Mark 12:28-34; Luke 10:25-37.

C. Although not strictly defined in the Bible, the most extensive comment on love is in 1 Corinthians 13:1-13, which both celebrates love as the highest of the virtues and attempts to describe love. Above all love "rejoices in the truth" of another and is the first promise of the vision of goodness in heaven. However, even here St. Paul seems to concede that love on earth is only a partial vision, rejoicing in the truth, but also seeing as in a blurry mirror, awaiting fulfillment when we "know perfectly as [we] are known" by God.

D. Love celebrates the goodness in another, and also the goodness that God intends for another. It sees in another person what God sees. Thus, St. John says that those who love are in God. E.g., 1 John 4:11-12. St. Thomas associates love with wisdom, the understanding of the plan of God. See Summa Theologica II-II q. 45 art. 4. Thus, all true love is, at least indirectly, a worship of God. See 1 John 4:12, 20-21

E. Love seeks to know more about the person as he is and as God intends him to be. And this perception of the goodness of the other person in turn leads to greater love. Thus, to love and to know must go together.

II. Love brings to fulfillment lesser virtues and good but lesser loves.

A. Benevolence desire to do good for others. See Summa Theologica II-II q. 31. It is good in itself and commanded by God as necessary for true love (as well as a living faith, see James 2:14-17), but in itself does not go to the depths of love.

B. Almsgiving (often called charity by the world) seeks to use worldly goods for a good purpose. This goal is likewise worthy, but in itself does not join people as true love does. Thus, one may have "charity without love." Summa Theologica II-Ii q. 32 art. 1. However, the full delight in benevolence and almsgiving can only come with charity.

C. Fraternal correction and forgiveness are two sides of the same coin of dealing with flaws in the beloved. See Matt. 18:15-20. The idea is that, if one loves a person, one seeks to have that person overcome whatever presents them from the goodness that God calls them to. It forgives, thus not imprisoning a person in past faults, but also corrects to overcome those faults.

D. As C.S. Lewis points out in The Four Loves, the love of God is built upon and controls all human loves so that they can be more fully themselves, while complementing each other. As St. Thomas points out, the love of God brings about a peace within the self because it orders all human desires and loves toward the beloved and above all toward God. See Summa Theologica II-II q. 29. It also leads to a peace among all who love God, but not necessarily with the world.

1. Friendship involves the benevolence of people based upon shared goals or vision in life. Aristotle and most of the ancient Greek philosophers listed this love as the highest of humans loves. However, as Lewis points out, friendship can lead one to ill as well as good and can lead to a certain arrogance. If disciplined by the love of God, it is the basis for our relationship with God through Jesus, who says, "You are my friends if you do what I command you." John 15:14.

2. Romantic love joins a man and a woman in complementing each other through bringing the other side of the human race. It was the first love of humans and the source of about half of the poetry in English. If disciplined by God, it is the image of God's love for His people, as symbolized by the Song of Songs and even more so by the fact that Jesus took the Church as His bride. However, if let go on its own, it is also the source of much of the greatest folly in the world.

Contrast Judges 16:4-21 with Tobit 8. The Books of Wisdom, Sirach, and Proverbs also present Wisdom as a true and lovely woman, as opposed to folly which is attractive but treacherous. See Wisdom 7-8, 10; Sirach 14:20-15:10; Proverbs 8-9.

3. Familiarity, is the love of familiar things, and especially of the family. The family is where people generally first receive love and therefore learn to love. The Church is the family of God, in which we are adopted through Jesus Christ. See Romans 8:11-17; Gal. 4:1-7. Without the love of God, this love can become jealous and territorial. With God's love, it becomes the foundation of all of society and of the faith and the first society and what the Catechism calls "the domestic church."

4. Patriotism, the love of a nation or an area, involves gratitude for appreciation of the goodness of the land one lives in, and the goodness that can be. The Old Testament builds upon the Jewish patriotism for their homeland, the first promise of the everlasting kingdom. At Pentecost, all the nations of the known world gathered before the Church and heard the Gospel in their own language. It was a first promise of the gathering of the nations, prophesied by Isaiah and the Book of Revelations. See Is. 60:1-14, 66:18-21; Rev. 21:22-27. But, as with the prophets, true patriotism also involves a willingness to critique the injustices of one's land, and hold it to a higher standard. As G.K. Chesterton once wrote, "To say 'My country right or wrong' is like saying 'My family drunk or sober.'"

5. Love of creation, or nature, involves a celebration of God's creative goodness, as shown in nature. The psalmist and Christian writers generally sees in nature an image of the glory of God. See Ps. 19, 50:1-6. Paradise is describes as "the new heavens and the new earth" indicating a certain connection to this earth. See Rev. 21:1. Without the love of God, this love, however, can degenerate into a sort of idolatry, as the Book of Wisdom and St. Paul warn. See Wisdom 13:1-9; Romans 1:18-32.

III. Love both leads to joy and sorrow on this earth, in preparation for the joy of heaven.

A. As St. Thomas points out, joy is the natural overflowing of love, for love finds delight in the goodness of others, and above all in the goodness of God, of which there is no end. See Summa Theologica II-II q.28 art. 1. Thus does Scripture repeatedly call for joy. As St. Paul says, "Rejoice in the Lord always." Phil 4:4.

B. However, love involves opening oneself up to sorrow at separation from the beloved and at evil done to, or especially by the beloved. See Summa Theologica II-II q.28 art. 1-2. Thus, Jesus Himself grieved at peoples' hardness of heart, wept at the tomb of Lazarus and over Jerusalem's impending destruction, and suffered for the sins of humanity. See, e.g., Mark 3:5; Luke 19:41; John 11:35; Rom. 5:8.