

Our love for God

"Whom have I in heaven but you? Earth has nothing I desire besides you ...
My flesh and my heart fail; but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever ...
As for me, it is good to be near God"(Psalm 73:25-28).

1. Luke 10:25-28, 38-42

"A lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind"; and your neighbour as yourself". And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

"Jesus entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

Reflection from Saint Teresa of Avila

"I sometimes remember the complaint of that holy woman, Martha. Her complaint was not merely of her sister. I feel sure that the chief cause of her sorrow was the thought that You, Lord, had no compassion on her for the labour that she was enduring nor cared whether or no she was with You. Perhaps she thought that You had less love for her than for her sister, and this would have troubled her more than serving One Whom she loved so dearly, for love turns labour into rest. And so she said nothing to her sister, but made her complaint to You, Lord, alone, for love made her bold enough to ask why you did not care for her. Your answer, which seems to imply that the source of her complaint was as I have been saying, was that it is love alone which gives value to all things and that the most needful thing is that it should be so great that nothing can hinder its operation"(from *Exclamations of the soul to God*, Peers vol 2, page 406).

Reflections from John of the Cross

"In Deuteronomy 6:5, we receive the command to employ all the faculties, appetites, operations and emotions of our soul in God, so that we may avoid the use of our ability and strength for anything else"(John of the Cross, *Ascent III*, 16,1).

"The soul arrives at the true fulfilment of the first commandment which, *neither disdain anything human, nor excluding it from this love*, states: You shall love your God with all your heart, and with all your mind, and with all your soul and with all your strength"(John of the Cross, *Dark Night II*,11,4).

2. The essential focus

"The union of love of God is a habitual and loving attentiveness of the will to God"(John of the Cross, *Spiritual Canticle* 28,10).

"The will should rejoice only in what is for the honour and glory of God"(Ascent III,17,2).

"Although the Holy One continues to be deliverer and sustainer, love calls us beyond using God to satisfy our needs, to heal us, to get us out of trouble, or to enhance our efficiency. Love calls us to gratitude, relinquishment, celebration, service, play, praise, companionship, intimacy, communion, and always to deeper yearning. In other words, love calls us to love"(Gerald May *The Awakened Heart: opening yourself to the love you need*, page 78).

"The heart yearns, in simple, silent, pleading, for action that does not mimic love but springs forth from it, for efficiency that is not an end in itself but a beginning of love's play, for love to reign over all service. ... My single desire for God will be of more help to my friends because my single desire for God will birth the kind of action that will really help them. It is not desiring God instead of doing helpful actions, but desiring God as the source of the actions that are going to be really helpful. It is that simple: put efficiency first, and the world gets to be the way it is today; put love first, and the whole meaning of efficiency is transformed"(Gerald May page 234).

"Like billowing clouds, like the incessant gurgle of the brook, the longing of the soul can never be stilled. It is this longing with which holy persons seek their work from God."

(from Meditations with Hildegard of Bingen Santa Fe NM, 1982, page 70).

"As long as our will retains whims that are opposed to the divine union, fantasies of 'Yes' or 'No', we remain children, we do not walk with the giant steps of love; for the fire has not yet burned the whole alloy, the gold is not pure, we are still seeking ourselves"(van Ruysbroeck, Oeuvres choisies, 157).

3. The place of feelings

"I am moved with tender feelings of love for you, Lord, my strength"(Psalm 18:1).

We may indeed experience feelings of love for God. The opening words of Psalm 18 use a word for "love" derived from the word for the "womb"(see Psalm 22:10; 110:3). This word for love is found 14 times in the psalms, though it is important to note that on every other occasion it refers to the tenderness of God's love for us (Psalm 25:6; 40:11; 51:1; 69:16; 77:9; 79:8; 103:4,13; 112:14; 116:5; 119:77,156; 145:9). Psalm 18 alone in the whole of the Bible uses it of our love for God.

"Since the soul cannot in this life enjoy God essentially, all the sweetness and delight it tastes, however sublime, cannot be God. ... If, in any way, the will can comprehend God and be united to Him, it is through love, and not through any gratification of the appetite. And since the delight, sweetness, and satisfaction that can come to the will is not love, no delightful feeling can be an adequate means for the union of the will with God. It is the operation of the will which is the proportionate means for this union. The will's operation is quite distinct from the will's feeling. By its operation, which is love, the will is united with God and terminates in Him, and not by the feeling and gratification of its appetite, which remains in the soul and goes no further. The feelings serve only as stimulants to love"(John of the Cross, Letter 14th April 1589).

4. What we can do

"To love is to labour to divest and deprive oneself for God of all that is not God"(John of the Cross, Ascent II,5,7).

"When the soul completely rids itself of what is repugnant and not conformed to the divine will, it rests transformed in God through love"(John of the Cross, John of the Cross, Ascent II,5,3).

"The soul can know clearly whether or not she loves God purely. If she loves him, her heart, her love, will not be set on herself or her own satisfaction or gain, but upon pleasing God, and giving God honour and glory. In the measure she loves herself, that much less she loves God"(John of the Cross, Spiritual Canticle 9,5).

"God does not place his grace and love in the soul except according to its desire and love. Anyone truly loving God must strive not to fail in this love, for he will thereby induce God, if we may so express it, to love him further and to find delight in his soul"(John of the Cross, Spiritual Canticle 13,12).

"Our decision must be to give God everything; then do our duty, serve others and love, whatever the feeling and whatever the cost. If our faculty for choosing is not be like a worn our battery, we must decide what we really want and concentrate on that"(Ruth Burrows, *Ascent to Love*).

5. Where is this God whom we are to love in this way?

"I asked the earth ... I asked the sea ...
and they replied: 'We are not your God. Look beyond us!'
I asked the sky, the sun, the moon, the stars,
and they said: 'Neither are we the God whom you seek!'
I said to all these things:
'You have told me that you are not my God. Tell me something about him'.
With a loud voice they cried out: 'He made us!'
My questioning was my looking upon them. Their reply was their beauty".
(Augustine, *Confessions*, 10.6.9.).

"I see his blood upon the rose
And in the stars the glory of his eyes,
His body gleams amid eternal snows,
His tears fall from the skies.

I see his face in every flower;
The thunder and the singing of the birds
Are but his voice – and carven by his power
Rocks are his written words.

All pathways by his feet are worn,
His strong heart stirs the ever-beating sea,
His crown of thorns is twined with every thorn,
His cross in every tree"(Joseph M. Plunkett, 1887-1916).

"O most beautiful of creatures, transcendent spirit, who long to know where your beloved is and where you may find him so as to be united with him. He dwells within you. You are yourself the tabernacle, his secret hiding place. Rejoice, exult, for all you could possibly desire, all your heart's longing is so close, so intimate as to be within you; you cannot *be* without him"(John of the Cross, Spiritual Canticle, Stanza 1,7).

Bernard

"The body with all its needs will still weigh us down. The weakness of corrupt nature will remain, not yet mastered. Bitter pain will still rock our calm. But we will not be overcome in these sufferings, because we are held in love. Do you keep watch? He keeps watch also. If you rise at night before the time of vigil and hasten to anticipate the morning watch, you will find him there. He will always be waiting for you. You would be very rash if you claimed to love him first or love him more; his love is greater, and it preceded yours. Because the soul knows this, is it any wonder that she, his bride, boasts that God cares for her alone as though he had no others to care for, and she sets aside all her cares and devotes herself to him alone with all her heart"(Bernard, Song of Songs, Sermon 69,8)..

Julian of Norwich

After twenty years spent pondering the meaning of the visions which she received from God, Julian of Norwich came to see:

"Love was the meaning.
Who showed it to you? Love.
What was shown to you? Love.
Why was it shown to you? For Love.
Keep yourself in that love and you will learn more of it,
and you will never learn anything else – ever!"(Final chapter of "Showings").

The Cloud of Unknowing

"I tell you this: one loving blind desire for God alone is more valuable in itself, more pleasing to God and to the saints, more beneficial to your own growth, and more helpful to your friends, both living and dead, than anything else you could do"(page 60).

John of the Cross

*Now I occupy my soul
and all my energy ["caudal" - river in spate] in His service;
I no longer tend the herd,
nor have I any other work
now that my every act is love.*(Spiritual Canticle, Stanza 28)

"When the soul reaches the state of union of love, a little of this pure love is more precious to God and to the soul and more beneficial to the Church, even though it seems that one is doing nothing, than all other works put together"(Spiritual Canticle 29,2).

"God will show the soul how to love Him as perfectly as she desires ... Transforming the soul into his love, God gives her his own strength by which she can love Him. As if he were to put an instrument in her hands and show her how it works by operating it jointly with her, He shows her how to love and gives her the ability to do so"(Spiritual Canticle 38,4).

"At the evening of life, you will be examined in love. Learn to love as God desires to be loved, and abandon your own ways of acting"(Sayings of light and love n.57).

Therese of Lisieux

"No longer do I desire suffering or death, and still I love them both. It is *love alone* that attracts me. I desired them for a long time. I possessed suffering, and believed that I had touched the shores of heaven, that the little flower would be gathered in the springtime of her life. Now, abandonment alone guides me. I have no other compass! I can no longer ask for anything with fervour, except the accomplishment of God's will in my soul, without any creature being able to set obstacles in the way"(Therese of Lisieux, Spiritual Autobiography, Ms A, 1895).

"I understood that the Church had a Heart and that this Heart was BURNING WITH LOVE. I understood that it was love alone that made the Church's members act, that if love ever became extinct, apostles would not preach the gospel and martyrs would not shed their blood. I understood the LOVE COMPRISED ALL VOCATIONS, THAT LOVE WAS EVERYTHING, THAT IT EMBRACED ALL TIMES AND PLACES, IN A WORD, THAT IT WAS ETERNAL! Then, in the excess of my delirious joy, I cried out: O Jesus, my Love, my vocation - at last I have found it; MY VOCATION IS LOVE! ... Why speak of a delirious joy? No, this expression is not exact, for it was rather the calm and serene peace of the navigator perceiving the beacon which must lead him to the port. O luminous Beacon of Love, I know how to reach You. I have found the secret of possessing Your Flame. ... O Jesus, I know it, love is repaid by love alone, and so I searched and found the way to solace my heart by giving you love for love"(Therese of Lisieux, Spiritual Autobiography, Ms B, 8.9.1896).

"It seems to me that I never sought anything but the truth. (pause) I am not sorry for handing myself over to love. (pause) Oh, I love Him! My God, I love you" (last words of Therese of Lisieux, 30.9.97)

A practical suggestion

1. Do not work at loving God. It is a gift to be received, not a project to be achieved.
2. It is no good just admiring others and trying to copy them. This can be like "stepping through the motions of a dance without ever hearing the music, copying the brush strokes of an artist without ever seeing the picture. It is the form of love without love's spirit. It is heartless"(May, page 235).
3. Make space in the heart to listen for grace = to listen for the response which God is gracing me to make.

"If we give ourselves more space between feeling and response, and enter that space in a consecrated way, we will find ourselves empowered for whatever response love calls for. I am sure of it. The power then is not just ours; it is the nuclear fusion of divine grace and our dignified willingness ... Authentic loving responsiveness invites us to turn our consciousness toward the exact point where our hearts are already looking: to the source of love. There, and only there, is the wellspring of authentic responsiveness found"(May, page 240).

"Find your heart as best you can, follow it towards the source of love as much as possible, consecrate yourself, and trust. God's grace is present, God's love is irrevocable, and you can trust it and trust yourself within it. There are no exceptions. There are no places inside you or in the whole of creation where God's love does not exist. It is alive in prisons and hospital wards, in earthquakes and hurricanes, in your own selfishness and addictions. It is always crying out to your heart, and your heart is awake, responding. Seek it and trust it"(May, page 244).