

Love of Self

‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’

(Mark 12:31, quoting Leviticus 19:16).

1. ‘Do the truth in love’(Ephesians 4:15)

Truth is an essential element of love. We love only to the extent that we are not pretending or living in a world of make-believe. We love only in so far as we are in touch with our own truth and the truth of the other person. We may or may not feel good when we love, but if we do good then we are loving.

When our words and actions and ways of relating flow from the reality of who we are and affirm and nurture another's reality - then we are truly loving. It is the same with love of self. To be love it must relate to the reality of who I am.

Saint Bernard prays: 'May the Bridegroom enter as one who brings peace, joy and gladness; but may he also enter with the growth of maturity, to purify my joy and control my arrogance with the stern gaze of truth'

(Sermon on the Song of Songs 74,11).

2. love of self in relation to God

The most profound truth about myself is that I am a creature of God and that life is something which I receive moment by moment as a gift. I cannot give it to myself, nor secure it for myself. Any efforts to do so that neglect this truth are doomed to failure. Genuine love of self needs to grow towards nurturing those desires and aspirations and decisions that respond to grace, while not giving in to those other desires and aspirations and decisions that resist grace.

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- Saint Bernard of Clairvaux teaches that the highest form of love includes the love that we have for ourselves as we are in relation to God. Thomas Merton commenting on this says: ‘This is the high point of Bernard's Christian humanism. It shows that the fulfilment of our destiny is not merely to be lost in God, as the traditional figures of speech would have it, like a <drop of water in a barrel of wine or like iron in the fire> but found in God in all our individual and personal reality, tasting our eternal happiness not only in the fact that we have attained to the possession of his infinite goodness, but above all in the fact that we see his will done in us.’

For Saint Bernard, the lowest level of love is to love oneself for one's own sake. A higher level of love is to love God because of what God does for me. Even higher is to love God because God is good rather than because of what he does for me. The highest degree of love is to love God because God is good and to love oneself only in relation to God.

- We must learn to love ourselves as God loves us. This means loving all of ourselves - our shadow side as well, while doing what we can to respond to grace and resist sin.

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‘If you want to become my follower, deny your self and take up your cross daily and follow me. For if you want to save your life you will lose it, but if you lose your life because of me you will save it. What does it profit you to gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit your self?’(Luke 9:23-25).

Julian of Norwich 1342-1413 'Showings' Chapter 40.

'Christ taught us to do good in return for evil. Here we may see that he is himself this love, and does to us as he teaches us to do; or he wishes us to be like him in undiminished, everlasting love towards ourselves and our fellow Christians. No more than his love towards us is withdrawn because of our sin does he wish our love to be withdrawn from ourselves or from our fellow Christians. But we must unreservedly hate sin and endlessly love the soul as God loves it. Then we should hate sin just as God hates it, and love the soul as God loves it.'

3. Learning from the love others give us

We can grow in genuine self-love through all kinds of experiences, particularly painful ones, for it is pain that alerts us to the fact that something is not right in our relating. However these painful experiences could just as easily lead us along the path of despair. We could just as easily attempt to live in distraction, running away from the pain. Such a response leads to self-destruction. What makes it possible for us to face the pain and to learn to love ourselves is the love which others give us. That is why we are so grateful to those who have loved us through such experiences.

It is essential that the other person knows the real me, for otherwise I know that he or she is only attracted by the mask I am wearing or the image I am projecting. When that happens I know that what I am being offered, however well intentioned, is not genuine love. It is something I have engineered. In any case, unless others have their own reasons for living in a world of make-believe, they soon see through my mask.

We are tempted to fit in with prevailing market-driven models imposed from outside the self. Living with the fear of being unacceptable, we are tempted to want to make ourselves appear attractive so as to be admired, liked and wanted.

If we are going to find our true selves and experience and enjoy true loving, we have to climb out of the cradle where everything is 'getting'. Such a way of behaving is selfish, for we are opting to maintain our present level of 'security' and indulge our felt needs rather than risk the giving of the true self and the receiving of another when love beckons us to do so.

We need to become aware of the ways in which we do things, motivated by our desire for a return. God, who is love, is gracing us in and through every experience to learn to share in his love which is unconditional. Such a love is the fruit of grace. We cannot make it happen, but we can honestly admit the limits of our loving and we can long that our 'hidden self may become strong'(Ephesians 3:16), and that gradually we may learn to respond to God's grace which is drawing us towards love because it is drawing us towards God.

4. The importance of self-knowledge

‘The practice of self-knowledge is the first requirement for advancing to the knowledge of God’(John of the Cross Spiritual Canticle 4,1).

‘However high a state the soul may have attained, self-knowledge is incumbent upon it, and this it will never be able to neglect even if it should so desire ... Self-knowledge is so important that, even if you were raised right up to the heavens, I should like you never to relax your cultivation of it. So long as we are on this earth, nothing matters more to us than humility’(Teresa of Avila, Interior Castle I.2.8).

To gain self-knowledge we need to learn the art of being reflective. We need to cultivate the silent space needed to come to know our own heart. But self-knowledge is not gained by staring at ourselves in isolation. It can be attained only by seeing ourselves as we really are in the reflected light of the love which God and other people have for us. Those who truly love us see a truth which we need to see. Their love provides the proper environment where we can safely look at ourselves without being overwhelmed by our lack of self-esteem, or plunging into self-indulgence.

What are some of the truths that I can learn about myself as liberated by love?

- I am a creature totally dependent on God, and so totally dependent on love. Genesis speaks in terms of our being made up of dust (held together by God's creating power) plus breath (experiencing the gift of God's Spirit, and so made in God's image, able to dialogue with God).

- I am a person dear to Jesus

‘You were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body’(1Corinthians 6:20). ‘It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, loving me and giving himself for me’(Galatians 2:20).

‘Christ Jesus has made me his own’(Philippians 3:12).

‘We are the aroma of Christ’(2Corinthians 2:15).

- I am a temple of the Holy Spirit

It is good to remember the precise ways in which we have experienced being favoured by God. God is love and 'God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us'(Romans 5:5). True love of self is our sharing in God's love for us, a love which is a gift of grace.

- I am a person who belongs to the world and to my fellow creatures, especially other people. Because we belong to others, love is the way we are meant to be: being a willing gift to others that expresses and realises a transcending of one's present self and that creates the proper environment which enables another to respond in love.

Encouraged by my awareness of God's love, I find that:

- I experience feelings, desires and emotions that draw me away from love towards behaviour that is distracting or destructive. Careful and prayerful reflection can bring this out into the open. I need to learn to understand my motivation, and to learn ways of re-directing my energies. This is the essence of discipline: As disciples of Jesus we learn from him to seek the truth in love. We also learn to love ourselves in our failures and to learn from them.

- I may have developed my own ways of avoiding the truth of my dependence on God. Such an avoidance can lead in either of two directions. We can try to be totally self-reliant, or we can continually look to others, expecting them to meet our needs. It is important to know how, with my temperament, I am likely to sin.

- I have been influenced by my upbringing and environment as well as by my past choices in ways that are not helpful to my true self, and not loving. Discovering these habits is not pleasing but it is a grace not to be avoided. The truth (if we learn to act upon it) does set us free.

- I can let failure lead to despair, and this can be an obstacle to self-love.
- I can have unrealistic and misguided expectations of myself and of others. These, too, can work against developing a healthy self-love.

- I can let myself be used by others, preferring absence of conflict to the truth.

‘When self-knowledge arouses in a soul sorrowful contrition at the same time as ardent love, profound adoration, and the most elevated aspirations, the feeling of its own powerlessness along with most generous resolutions, one can declare it authentic. It bears the divine mark of its origin, which is peace, spiritual balance, freedom and fecundity.’

(Father Marie Eugène OCD "I want to see God" page 48).

‘Unless getting to know oneself really leads to a change of heart, a more careful and conscientious fulfilment of one's obligations and a more selfless love for others, it is useless’(Burrows To Believe in Jesus, page 57)

‘Almost always God's greatest gifts are wrapped up in the sacking of painful self-knowledge.’

(Burrows Ascent to Love page 58; John of the Cross, Night I,12,2).

‘Today, people may pay lip-service to their nothingness, but their real preoccupation is with “developing their personality”. The claims we make for our 'ego' are insolent’(A Carthusian The Hermitage Within, page 52).

5. Self-sacrifice: The Christian paradox

‘Sacrifice’ comes from two Latin words, sacer meaning holy and facers meaning to make. To sacrifice means to make holy. True self-sacrifice is based on the realisation that only God can make holy. To be self-sacrificing (in the best sense) means to open oneself willingly to God's sanctifying action. It means allowing Christ to live in me and to draw me into communion with God even when this involves allowing much of what I perceive as the self to be diminished’(Ephesians 3:14-21)

There is a negative and generally destructive kind of ‘self-sacrifice’ where we do real harm to our true selves (and to others) in the name of nurturing others. True love for others will always be a gift of the real self to another, not a destroying of the self. Sometimes in the name of being ‘self-sacrificing’ we are really indulging our false self by trying to keep up an image. This happens when, for example, we fail to confront because we want to maintain the image of being an understanding or compassionate person.

Another example is when we indulge another person without regard to the truth or to the other person's genuine spiritual good. Such 'nurturing' is destructive, for we are, often unwittingly, reinforcing the other person's dependence on us so as to indulge our own need to be needed. We think we are being loving, but it is the feeling of being loving that we are seeking, and not the genuine good of the person whom we are using for our own self-indulgence.

6. Some qualities of authentic love of self

Genuine love is self-replenishing activity. Indeed, it is even more; it enlarges rather than diminishes the self; it fills the self, rather than depleting it. It is self-fulfilling because it takes us to a deeper level of self-transcendence. Love is an art. We will never learn to love by dreaming of finding the right object for our love (including developing the right self that we judge to be worth loving). It is no good waiting for the right person to happen by.

What we need to do is learn the art of loving:
the art of giving ourselves as a gift to others.
To do this we have to know that our real self
is worth offering.

We need to love ourselves. To do this we need to:

- respect ourselves (Latin re-spicere = to look and look again!) It is important to know myself now as I am now – as I really am. Not as I would like to be. Not as others expect me to be. Not as I want others to see me.

- We need to find courage (from ‘cor’ – the Latin word for heart), for we will have to let a lot go, and extend and transcend ourselves against the resistance of fear.

This is the meaning of ‘comfort’

(Latin, cum + fort = being strong with).

We have to face the trials of life, trusting that grace is always present. However unjust the trial may be, God is there and God can take the occasion to purify us. Note the related words fire; purge.

‘God is carrying me. Although I am walking at God’s pace, I do not feel this pace ... the senses do not attain to what God effects in the soul at this time. ... You should abandon yourself into God’s hands and not your own’. (John of the Cross Living Flame n.67).

- have compassion with ourselves (Latin, cum + passio) = feeling (suffering) with.
- be ready to know how to console ourselves (Latin, cum + solus) = stay with ourself when we are alone, and not give in to the need for distraction or support. If we are honest with significant others and they do offer support, let us thank God; but we all know how the folly of expecting others to provide what can only come from within.

- be true with ourself. Note the related words, be-troth-al ; trust
- be faithful to our true selves. Note the related words see confide, bide, fidelity.
- be devoted to our true good (Latin devotio = vowed to God).
- be at the service of our own true good. Note the related words ob-serving, con-serving, pre-serving.