

4/20

## LOVE COMES FROM GOD

### Fraternal Charity, Mystery of Salvation

---

Excerpts from the article by:  
H. Schillebeeckx, O.P.

God is a "hidden God", who is love - a hidden love. If we love one another, then God is revealed in us. It is not in the first place by word that Christ came to reveal the Father to us; not in saving that God is good, but by His action, notably by His human, visible, fraternal charity. Thus we must in our turn reveal the goodness of God.

The period extending from Christ's resurrection to our future resurrection at the time of His glorious coming is designated by Jesus as a time of love. We, the saved, are to pass on what Christ has given us: love. Christ has given us clearly to understand that on His return He will judge our love, the charity we have shown to our neighbor in the ordinary and even banal circumstances of our human life. To the first Christians this was a manifest truth. "If God thus loved us, dear friends, we in turn are bound to love one another. Though God has never been seen by any man, God Himself dwells in us if we love one another; His love is brought to perfection within us." (1 John 4:11-12)

God's love for us is a redeeming love which became visible in the human goodness of Christ. Our love for men should also be a redeeming love for the children of God - those who have been redeemed - and for all who are called to redemption - namely, all men, for "God wills that all men find salvation". (1 Tim. 2:4)

Our Christian fraternal charity is founded on that universal will to save of which God bears witness in Christ. It is precisely for this reason that fraternal charity, being divine, makes no distinction of persons: it goes out to all men, in their marvelous possibilities as children of God. The observation of the apostle James is characteristic in this respect: "My brethren, do not join faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with partiality towards persons". (James 2:1) Faith in the mystery of Christ is incompatible with a charity which is not directed towards all men. Christian fraternal charity is the charity of a family, including all the children of the Father who in Christ founded the family of Christians. This is why charity is universal - not in the sense of being abstract or platonic, but in the sense that it excludes no one, and that its motive is God as the Father of all the children.

----

The catechism phrase "we should love our neighbor for God's sake" is sometimes misunderstood. It does not mean that what we love in our neighbor is not the neighbor himself but God. To say to someone, "I love you; but in fact on closer inspection it is not you I love but someone else", would be strange indeed . . . . Men are lovable in themselves by reason of their humanity, and above all by reason of their belonging to the family of God, or of being called to belong to it. All men are loved by God, and the value this divine love gives them is the foundation of Christian charity towards men.



Fraternal charity is more intimately linked to the concrete person of the neighbor than a love that is merely earthly. Creatures are impenetrable to each other. This deep solitude is invincible, in spite of the deep unity wrought by human love. Since it is a divine love, penetrating everything, charity alone can make the bridge over to our neighbor in his intimate reality, even though the richness and intimacy of this fraternal charity remains fundamentally based on faith, just as does our love for God. It is only in faith that the contact of love with God and with our neighbor can be realized. Intimacy remains an intimacy in faith.

This situation, considered from a purely natural point of view, makes the supernatural love of neighbor appear almost artificial, as long as faith is not deeply lived. However it is nothing of the kind. There are people who, while well disposed on the level of fraternal charity, still fail precisely in perceiving all the aspects of this charity, preserving, or so they think, a pure love of God. This is just the point of Peguy's reproach to certain religious: "Because they love no one they think they love God". If it is true that certain people ought to put a little more supernatural into their natural love - if I may put it that way - it is no less true that there are others who ought to put a little more natural into their supernatural life. Just as our love for God is a real love, with all the richness that this word evokes, so our love of our neighbor is not a "putting on" but is love. A charity expressed only in a correct and superficial exterior attitude, accompanied by the repression of inner antipathy, the desire to avoid all conflict, by an outward good behavior, would not yet be Christian charity. "Even the heathen do as much" (Matt. 5:47). "Now that by obedience to the truth you have purified your souls until you feel sincere affection towards your brother Christians, love one another wholeheartedly with all your strength". (1 Peter 1:22)

----

Christian charity means "knowing how unstable is man's worthiness, how deep the abyss into which he may fall, and loving him in spite of that" (G. von Le Fort). Such is the earnestness of God's love for men. Christ loved us "when we were sinners" (Rom. 5:8), which means in our worst moments. The charity with which we love men as they are is independent of our neighbor's worthiness or unworthiness; it is a "divine absolute beginning" which penetrates into temporal human relations. How often do we, on the contrary, withdraw our charity as soon as we sorrowfully observe the weak and irritating points in our neighbor - which is the very moment when it should enter into action! We should love people as they are, with and not in spite of their faults. St. John gives this a decisive formulation: "love the brother you see" (1 John 4:20). That is, love the people you meet. That is the meaning of "neighbor" as given in the parable of the Good Samaritan. Doubtless it is easier to love the faraway brother than the one who is literally our "neighbor". Our "neighbors" are precisely those whom we meet concretely in our lives. This is moreover the final consequence of the historical reality of determined temporal situations. Thus to "love the man we see" means at the same time to love him as he is, with all his miseries and imperfections, and to love him as Christ showed us how: "unto death". (John 13:1)

Redeeming charity is always merciful, for if we ourselves are not wholly admirable in God's sight, we are not any more so in the sight of others. The commandment to love rests upon this foundation of an interior demand of God's love for us: "This is my commandment: that you love one another as I have loved you". (John 15:12) The charity of a family excludes none of its members



and, after all, the Father loves all men. All the children should likewise love each other with a reciprocal love so that the spirit of the family may develop in a healthy way. The fact that each human life has the possibility of ending beautifully is already enough to make each one personally worthy of love, thanks to the creating and "drawing" love of God. Every man is worthy of love, to the point that God became man and willed to sacrifice his own life for him. Charity apprehends the other precisely in his propensity to reach a noble fulfillment. Charity always sees, even in the most wayward of men, a grain of hope, that kernel of his personality which may be buried, locked up, powerless, even paralyzed, but never dead; sleeping, but always able to be awakened by the grace of our charity. This hidden, chilled kernel will be warmed by our love, our care and our concern, by our understanding and the disinterested gift of ourselves, and thus warmed, will revive and develop.

Goodness and charity are always creative; they heal and build. One who is fully conscious that he lives and breathes by the mercy of God cannot be lacking in mercy towards his neighbor. If we celebrate mass each day, and do not have this "warming" fraternal charity, it is against us that Christ fulminates: "I require mercy, not sacrifice". (Mt. 9:13) "If, when you are bringing your gift to the altar, you suddenly remember that your brother has a grievance against you, leave your gift where it is before the altar. First go and make your peace with your brother, and only then come back and offer your gift." (Mt. 5:23-24) This is the basis of the Christian requirement to love also the sinner and the enemy. To pardon never means not to take account of the evil and to close one's eyes to what is not good. On the contrary, its marvelous meaning is to conquer evil interiorly with charity, to introduce God into a situation where holiness is absent, thus sanctifying it from within.

To be a neighbor, according to the parable of the Good Samaritan, is not so much a given fact as a mission. To the question, "Who is my neighbor?" Christ answers in the parable: "He who showed mercy is the neighbor". We must make ourselves neighbors through charity. This active element in charity, this going out of oneself to meet the other, made the saints so perfectly detached from themselves as not to realize their goodness to their neighbors, and to be astonished at being called good. "Only God is good".

"Bear one another's burdens" (Gal. 4:2) This mission is not inspired by an ascetic principle or even by a human and ethical one, but by the fundamental dogma of Christianity. Bear one another's burdens, just as Christ has taken upon himself the burdens of all men by dying in their place on the cross. Such charity builds up the community of salvation: "Bonded and knit together by every constituent joint, the whole frame grows through the due activity of each part, and builds itself up in love." (Eph. 4:16) Following the essential law of the saving love of Christ, which goes "unto death", such fraternal charity will also include a large share of pain, of detachment from self-something far more fundamental than asceticism. It is sharing the lot of the fraternal charity of Christ. It is in fraternal charity, practiced even in the smallest and most ordinary details of life, that the quintessence of all positive asceticism is to be found: the love of Christ made visible in our lives.

If love is the blossoming of an act of divine love penetrating into human relations here below, then earthly affections will be charity only if they are transformed from within into a manifestation of God, into an expression of what we are as men who have been saved. The activity which corresponds to the nature of the Christian is to love. This is the barometer which measures the depth of his life in grace.



Fraternal charity is to be for others towards God. This is the marvel of the love of neighbor in Christianity. This is why we find in the very structure of fraternal charity the solution to the problem which, in the long run, leads some people to fail in it. After some time they observe that they are continually giving themselves, handing themselves over in a generous charity, while the effort is not reciprocated, the neighbor does not respond. What is more, they see that their availability becomes an occasion for others to "get on", to put the disagreeable jobs off onto the shoulders of the magnanimous. On this point the demands of charity, especially in a closed community like a convent or a family, lead at times to a heroic self-abnegation; but this detachment is in the direct line of the Christian's fraternal charity and finds the highest of compensations. For Christian charity which has not received a response is never fruitless. Every act of charity, even if not responded to, is finally caught up in the reciprocal love of God, for it is his love that we penetrate by fraternal charity. Christian fraternal charity is never solitary, but is most profoundly lived in the intimacy of a solitude shared with God. This view in faith makes our charity faithful, strong, undiscouraged. Its final answer is always "conquer evil with good". (Rom. 12:21) What is necessary in order to carry out the mission of charity to its limit is to believe in charity and in its strength. Charity as divine mission can never go beyond the strength conferred by grace; it may well demand the humanly impossible, but this "humanly impossible" remains always possible to the believer, by the real consciousness he has of the mystery of Christ and of the strength it radiates. The grace which makes us brothers in Christ and unites us into one holy family - sanctifying grace is a grace of brotherliness, says St. Thomas - is at the basis of all this life of love and abnegation. "The glory which thou gavest me I have given to them, that they may be one, as we are one; I in them and thou in me, may they be perfectly one". (John 17:22)

----

Closed communities place hard demands on fraternal charity. In the case of frictions, we must begin by having faith in the other. We must be a priori well disposed towards him. If not, we fall under the condemnation of Christ: "You judge from without". If this a priori predisposition is lacking, we may see with precision, but it will be through glasses that have falsified everything. We become blind to good; we suppose others' thoughts and intentions; we "interpret" according to these suppositions; and while we take our defense measures the other redoubles his little counter-offensives. On either side there develops a complicated network of circumspection and security measures, with the result that this tense situation may become very critical. However, if the parties involved were to ask themselves in cold blood exactly what they reproach each other with, they would not know what to answer. Self-love is very often hidden behind this tragi-comic situation.

In fact, we always have the tendency to see only that aspect of reality that corresponds to our affective situation of the moment. If a certain attitude is created of mutual sizing-up, of affective mistrust and anxious observation, it will be all too easy to develop little tentacles of hypersensitivity towards all the evil we really see in our neighbor's character and attitudes, and to become blind to his luminous aspects. Thus all wrongs are seen in quite abnormal proportions and acquire a relief they do not really have. Let us always begin by admitting the principle based on the experience of life, namely, that many times people turn their bad side outward while hiding their light within. And if, moreover, we are quickened by the Christian passion: "He must increase while I decrease", then all these difficulties disappear, at least in our hearts.



To sum up: true Christian fraternal charity is independent of the worth or unworthiness of the neighbor; it is a mission which tends to manifest God to every man who comes into the world and is encountered by us. This mission of active charity imposes on us at the same time the duty of being lovable, of making it possible and even easy for others to have fraternal charity towards us. This lovable-ness has its origin primarily in the fact of our being Christian in the full sense of the word, and thus also in our charity, which takes flesh in a human lovable-ness. The sacramental character of Christian fraternal charity, in so far as it is the manifestation of the love of God in terrestrial form, will make charity a complete lovable-ness, a total charity of "human beings", only on condition that it is not solely human goodness and cheerfulness, nor exclusively divine goodness, but rather a transformation of divine goodness into human goodness, the human translation of God's merciful will to save.