

## **Made to love: the truth and beauty of love**

CARDINAL CARLO CAFFARRA

I shall divide this talk into two parts. In the first, I would like to very simply present the Christian perception of love. In the second, I shall draw your attention to that which is discrediting this image in Western culture and in the hearts of young people.

### *1. The Christian perception of love*

Let us begin with a quotation taken from a play by Karol Wojtyła called *The Jeweller's Shop*: “There is no other matter embedded more strongly in the surface of human life, and there is no matter more unknown and more mysterious. The divergence between what lies on the surface and the mystery of love constitutes precisely the source of the drama. It is one of the greatest dramas of human existence”.<sup>1</sup>

This morning we would like to enter into this “great drama of human existence”, in order to discover what it is that leads people away from this “divergence” and from the conflict between what is found “on the surface” and “the mystery of love”. Let you and I now take our minds on a journey towards the truth and beauty of love.

1.1. Our point of departure is unusual and in a way it is quite disturbing. When Christianity speaks of love, it is not referring primarily to human love. It is speaking of the mystery of God. The subject of Christian discourse on the truth and beauty of love is not human beings. It is God. To the question, “what is love?”, Christian faith replies: it is the channel between God and human beings and it is the foundation of this channel. The narration of this channel, and hence of the revelation of its inner truth and beauty, is Sacred Scripture. The summit of this revelation is Jesus Christ.

Can human beings contemplate the beauty of this love and know its truth? There is really only one possibility, one way that brings us to knowledge of the truth of love, and that is to experience love.

It is the experience of God’s love for humanity in Christ that allows me to know what love is. This experience has two aspects. From the point of view of its object, God’s love in Christ has to be seen to be directed towards me (“who loved me and gave himself for me” - *Gal. 2: 20*). From the point of view of the subject, there must be an attitude of expectation and petition (Sacred Scripture, the objective narration of God’s love, concludes with the invocation “come” - *Rev 22: 20*). “Reason’s response to the event

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<sup>1</sup> K. WOJTYŁA, *The Jeweler's Shop*, San Francisco 1992, p. 57-58.

ultimately appears as a request, through the utter poverty that is seen there in its vital force: come!”<sup>2</sup>

The question on whether human beings can know the truth of love can therefore be answered by saying that the only possibility is for them to feel loved. My theological response is: the only possibility is to receive the Holy Spirit within us.

Does a “place” exist in which the mystery of God’s love in Christ is given to human beings? It does exist, and it is the Eucharistic celebration. Thomas Aquinas wrote that: “the whole mystery of our salvation is comprised in this sacrament.”<sup>3</sup> Knowledge through experience (none other is possible), has its source in participation in the Eucharist. It is knowledge by means of the Eucharist.

We could say that the love that God in Christ holds for human beings has to be expressed in human language. This has happened. God declared his love for humankind by using the language of conjugal love, of parental love (paternal and maternal), and of the love contained in friendship. This threefold love, however, contains a significance that transcends it to an immeasurable degree. This threefold language holds a meaning that makes it indicative of a reality that has no comparison (“For who in the skies can be compared to the Lord?” - *Psalms* 89: 6): absolutely freely given, pure gratuitousness. This is the magnitude of God’s love. Thomas Aquinas made the profound statement that the first gift God ever gave us was the decision to love us. All other gifts are in consequence of this. God’s decision to love us meant that God decided to communicate Himself, his very Life, to humankind.

However, “gratuitousness” does not mean “indifference to the reply” of human beings. If God did not want me and was not really passionate about my response, then God would not really love me. God’s love in Christ is gratuitousness and desire.

1.2. When Christian Revelation speaks of love, it is not only speaking of God’s love. As Benedict XVI wrote: “biblical faith does not set up a parallel universe, or one opposed to that primordial human phenomenon which is love, but rather accepts the whole person; it intervenes in his/her search for love in order to purify it and to reveal new dimensions of it.”<sup>4</sup>

This statement is quite important. There are three basic affirmations: love is a human phenomenon in its very origin; biblical revelation has a purifying function; it likewise has an uplifting function. In brief: the aptitude for love is constitutive of human beings, but it has to be set straight and lifted up.

Saint Basil wrote something that could help us to understand this better. He said: “we possess the capacity to love implanted at the moment we were first constituted. And the proof is not from without, for anyone may discover this, from himself and within himself. For we are by nature enamoured of the beautiful [and good]”.<sup>5</sup> The experience that each one has of love is a desire, a movement (*ad-petitus*) towards that which is good and that which is beautiful. The time at our disposal today does not allow me to devote the time

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<sup>2</sup> C. DI MARTINO, *La conoscenza è sempre un avvenimento*, Milano 2009, p. 33.

<sup>3</sup> THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologica* 3, 83, 4.

<sup>4</sup> BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est*, 8.

<sup>5</sup> A. M. SILVAS, *The Asketicon of Saint Basil the Great, the Longer Responses* 10-12. Oxford 2005, p. 164.

that it would merit to the definition of love that says that it is the natural desire for what is good. I shall simply make some important observations.

When we say “good” (“For we are by nature enamoured of the ... good”) we understand something or someone that has such perfection (moral, aesthetic, physical, etc.) that we are not left indifferent. It attracts our attention and motivates us to respond (von Hildebrand calls it *Beruehrens-beziehung*). Our desire is always a response to something or someone that contains within itself a reason to be desired.

However, when we speak of love, we mean the response (in the sense mentioned above) of a person to a person. It is an interpersonal relationship. However, it is in the deeper sense – not only because of the moral, aesthetic or physical values that a person possesses –, that it is a relationship to the person as such.

It is a spiritual response that involves knowledge-appreciation (of the value) of the person. It is not the stimulus-response type, nor the need-satisfaction type.

It is a response from the heart, filled with feeling. In order to truly say “I love”, it is not enough to say “I want to love”. It is the kind of connection in which a person is transported to the other.

It is therefore a response that involves a desire to be united, that wants the happiness of the person who is loved, and longs for there to be a response.

Plato was the first to say that love – which we can now define as an affective response to the worth that a person represents for the other, given in freedom – in itself contains an enigmatic paradox: it is the son of Poros, wealth, and of Penia, poverty. The paradox is in the tension inherent in self-giving love, on the one hand; and on the other, in the tension regarding whether the other will correspond, will accept the gift, and will respond with self-giving. Altruistic intent seems to curb the intention to possess.

The Holy Father wrote, as we have seen above, that the whole person is accepted, so both intentions are constitutive of human love. Neither of them is rejected. It is this dialectic between giving and possession that constitutes the point of contact between the human person of the biblical revelation of love and love as being an intrinsic part of humanity. In order to understand this, let us look at a quotation from Saint Paul: “hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (*Rm 5: 5*).

The love of God does not refer to the love with which we love God, but to the love with which God loves us. It is divine love itself. Paul says that it was “poured into our hearts”. God lets us “feel” the measure and quality of the love He has for us. We experience this, not only in the sense of it being made known to us. The biblical passage does not say “poured into our minds”. In the sense that we feel it in the organ that pertains to love, the heart, it is the synthesis within the self of intelligence, freedom and feelings. The heart of the human person partakes in the love with which God loves.

This participation is due to the gift of the Holy Spirit that comes to dwell in our hearts. The divine Person of the Spirit is our participation in the very love with which God loves, in the sense that we become partakers of divine love because the Holy Spirit takes “possession” of our hearts and of our capacity to love.

This “spiritualisation” purifies our love and opens up new dimensions. All that is human is saved, safeguarded and raised up. Saint Irenaeus wrote: “... they being spiritual because they partake of the Spirit, and not because their flesh has been stripped off and taken

away”.<sup>6</sup>

The desire to possess a human person is combined with the move towards self-giving to the same person. It is not denied, but maintained within its deepest truth.

To conclude this first point: there are two essential dimensions to the Christian idea of love. It expresses the face of the mystery of God: God in his mystery and in his revelation of Himself is love. It expresses the mystery of humankind: the human person is made capable of loving as God loves, without the flesh being “stripped off and taken away”.

## 2. *Tormented love*

In this second part of my talk, I would like to look briefly at the pitfalls facing young people today that prevent them from understanding, or at least make it difficult for them to understand, the Christian perception of love.

If the Christian proclamation of love is to find soil in which to be planted, the person who hears it must have real self-awareness and the consequent experience of freedom. Between the two realities – self-awareness and way of being free – there is an inseparable connection and a kind of reciprocal infusion.

Self awareness in the Western world has progressively diminished in the sense that the “self” has become hidden from the eyes of consciousness in that which is most noble and correct. What has happened? The writer Robert Spaemann said that “we are victims of scientism and do not believe in ourselves anymore, in who we are and what we are, when we allow ourselves to be persuaded that we are only machines directed by our genes, and when we regard our power of reason to be simply a product of evolutionary adaptation that has nothing to do with truth”. The essential subjectivity of the person has gradually been “scrapped”.

The first consequence of this “scrapping of the self”<sup>7</sup> is the deforming of one’s relationship with other people: a relationship that is reduced and based on stimulus-response. Hume would say that it is the inability to take a step beyond oneself. The clearest sign of this condition is a decrease in free-will and spontaneity.

There is a substantial difference between each of these. Free-will is not a more spontaneous spontaneity! It is an essentially different way of behaving. This topic would require long reflection. I shall just give two ideas.

What distinguishes between acting freely and acting spontaneously is that the first shows the transcendence of the person over his/her actions and in his/her actions. It is the person who decides to take action, above and even against whatever is happening in his/her psyche. There are two expressions that help us to understand this. “I want” has a very different meaning from “I feel like”. The first denotes that I am making a self-determined decision. The second gives the idea that the decision is being determined by something else.

There is a second observation on the difference between free-will and spontaneity that is even more important. The action of wanting (“I want”) is always intentional, and it is

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<sup>6</sup> IRENEAUS, *Adversus Haereses*, V, 6 [www.newadvent.org].

<sup>7</sup> R. BODEI, *Destini personali. L'età della colonizzazione delle coscienze*, Milano 2002, pag. 254.

directed towards an object (e.g. “I want to study”). People decide to act because they recognise in that which they want (“to study rather than to have fun”) an intrinsic good, a “value” in itself (“it is good that I should study now”).

The self-determination and transcendence of a person is based on and conditioned by awareness, by the relationship of the person with the truth about goodness. The roots of all free-will, Thomas Aquinas wrote, is the judgment of reason. The theoretical affirmation and the practice of freedom, the constitution of the self that is taking action, the ability of human beings to know the truth about goodness, all stand and fall together. Let us try to summarise what we have said so far. I was asked: what is it that hampers the ability of young people today to listen to the Christian message of love? I replied: it is because the self has been submitted to a process of being discarded and scrapped. This process of elimination has deformed relations with others and reduced them to being spontaneous rather than free relationships. It is a case of “I feel like relating with so-and-so” rather than “I want to relate with so-and-so”. Love can only be free. Only people who are free are capable of loving.

I shall not say more on these topics because they will be taken up by other speakers. I shall now conclude.

From what I have said, should we conclude that the Christian message is totally peripheral to the self-awareness of people in the Western world? Yes and no.

Saints Paul and John insist very much on the topic of peripheralisation and on the contrast that exists between the Gospel and the world. However, when they say this, the two apostles claim that there is within creation an anti-creation. Human beings are born into the second of these. They are born attached to a wrong solidarity with Adam.

Does this represent real humanity? Could it not be humanity estranged from itself? The Christian message is addressed to human beings so that they will return to the truth of their primary origins. It is a gift of grace that gives new life so that human beings in Christ may no longer “live for themselves” (cf. *Rm* 14: 8), but become able to love. In the end, the message of love is the message inviting us to be converted to Christ and to live in Him. It is only in this way that we can find ourselves because we have regained our capacity for love. “Love alone brings a human being to full awareness of personal existence. For it is in love alone that man finds room enough to be what he is”.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. D. VON HILDEBRANDT, *Man and Woman*, Chicago 1965, p. 32.