

(English translation)

Rocca di Papa, October 24, 1978

## How to Love Our Neighbour

### *The way to reach God*

God gives everyone who seeks him a way of finding him. And often each person is convinced that their way is the shortest way to reach God.

No one could have made St. Theresa of Avila doubt that she had discovered the fastest way to get to God. She says that if you want to find God, it would be best to look for him where he is: in the centre of your heart. St. Francis finds God through nature. His "Canticle of the Sun," which embraces the whole universe, reveals his concept of God: the Creator, the Father of all that exists, so that animals and flowers, the sun, the moon and the stars, men and women, are all brothers and sisters.

It would be wonderful if we could get to know one by one all the ways of reaching him that God has opened up; this is what the followers of the various saints have always tried to do. But let's consider ourselves. It's well known that when God called me to consecrate myself to him forever, the attraction of that call and the elation which flooded my whole being because I had married God, were so unique and exceptional that I would never have wanted anyone or anything to break the enchantment of that one-to-one relationship with him. If anyone had told me that day that I was going to have companions, or revealed to me that a Movement was going to be born, I have the impression that something divine and inexpressible would have been broken.

But God very quickly made clear to me, as only he knows how, that to love him implied something specific: to love him in my brothers and sisters, in every brother and sister in the world.

God's concept of the human being is something unimaginable!

In 1949, I wrote: "The Father, Jesus, Mary, us. The Father permitted Jesus to feel forsaken by him *for us*. Jesus accepted being forsaken by the Father and he deprived himself of his Mother *for us*. Mary shared Jesus' abandonment and accepted the loss of her Son *for us*. It is *we*, therefore, who are put in first place. It is love which does such crazy things. So we too, when God's will requires it, must leave the Father, Jesus, and Mary for our neighbours."

Thus our neighbour took a definite place in our hearts.

But "whoever loses will find" (see Mt 10:39), and immediately it became clear to us that our neighbours were not to be loved for their own sake, but rather we had to love Christ in them. Jesus said: "Whatever you did to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters - and he means everyone - you did it to me" (Mt 25:40). Our whole previous way of looking at people and of loving them collapsed. If in some way Christ was in everyone, we couldn't discriminate or have preferences. All the human criteria used for classifying people into foreigners or fellow countrymen, old or young, beautiful or ugly, pleasant or unpleasant, rich or poor, all these categories were shattered. Christ was behind each person; Christ was in each person. ...

Living like this, we soon realised that for us, our way to God was our neighbour. Indeed, our neighbour appeared to us as a doorway through which we had to pass in order to encounter God.

We experienced this right from the very beginning. What a wonderful union we felt with God in the evening, or when we recollected ourselves, after having loved him all day in our brothers and sisters! Who could have given us that blessing, that inner peace, so new and heavenly, if not Christ who was living the words of his Gospel: "Give and it will be given to you" (Lk 6:38)? We had loved him all day in our neighbours, and now he was loving us.

These interior gifts were of such great benefit to us! They were our first experiences of the spiritual life, of the reality of a kingdom which is not of this world, of this earth! ...

*The bond between the love of God and the love of neighbour*

Our experience, therefore, tells us this: our love for our neighbours stems from our love for God, because we love them for God. But God's love blossoms in our hearts because we love our neighbour. ...

We have known from the very beginning of the Movement that there was a link between love for God and love for neighbour. Igino Giordani used to explain our way with this threefold expression: I – my neighbour – God. Gregory the Great speaks competently about the relationship between love for God and love for our neighbour, using an example which is very familiar to us: the root and the plant. “There are two precepts regarding Charity”, he says: “love for God and love for our neighbour. Love for our neighbour is born from our love for God, and our love for God is nourished by our love for our neighbour. For whoever neglects to love God is quite incapable of loving their neighbour. And we can advance more perfectly in love for God, if first, in the bosom of his love, we are nursed with the milk of love for our neighbour. Since love for God generates love for our neighbour, in giving the Law, before saying: ‘You shall love your neighbour’ (Mt 22:39), the Lord first of all established: ‘You shall love the Lord your God’ (Dt 6:5). Thus, in the soil of our hearts he first planted the root of love towards him, and then, like foliage, fraternal love developed. And this fact, that love for God is bound up to love for our neighbour is also attested to by John, when he says: ‘He who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen’” (1 Jn 4:20).<sup>1</sup>

Isidore of Seville emphasized that “Charity consists in love for God and in love for our neighbour.... Whoever separates himself from fraternal communion is deprived of a share in God's love.”<sup>2</sup>

And the Curé of Ars said these dreadful words: “Never lose sight of the fact that all the time you do not love your neighbour, the good God is full of wrath towards you....”<sup>3</sup>

St. John of the Cross makes the following affirmation: “When the love you have for a person is purely spiritual and founded on God alone, then in the measure in which that love grows, so does the love for God grow in your soul. Then, the more the heart is aware of the neighbour, the more it is also aware of God and desires him. These two loves grow, competing with one another.”<sup>4</sup>

Therese of Lisieux copied these words on to the back of a holy picture for a novice who feared that she loved her novice mistress too much.

Father Dhanis beautifully portrays love for the neighbour as an “overflowing” of our love for God onto our fellow human beings. This is how we see it, too. It's the same as we think in the Movement. “If you were to ask how Jesus envisions the close union between fraternal love and love for God, we must answer that he views the first as an overflowing of the second. He wanted his disciples to keep their hearts in unison with the heart of the heavenly Father, so that their love for God would extend to all those whom he loves as his children.... St. John indicated this with the following expression, rich in meaning: ‘Whoever loves the one who generated... loves the one who was born from him.’ ....”

Father Dhanis goes on to say: “One of the deeply comforting features in the countenance of the Church today – in the midst of the crisis which is shaking her –... is a sort of renewed understanding in many of the faithful of the primacy owed to love for God and neighbour in the Christian life. This renewal is apparent in exegesis, and in moral and spiritual theology. I am referring to a reality that is intensely lived in some religious institutes and movements in which there is a full awareness that authentic Christian love cannot be lived without the cross of Jesus. In these movements, there reigns a joy

<sup>1</sup> Gregory the Great, *Morals on the Book of Job*, 7, 28 (PL 75, 780-781).

<sup>2</sup> Isidore of Seville, *Sententiae*, II, 3, 7 (PL 83, 603).

<sup>3</sup> Curé d'Ars, *Scritti scelti*, Roma, 1975, p.114.

<sup>4</sup> John of the Cross, quoted in P. Descouvemont, *Saint Thérèse de l'Enfant de Jésus et son prochain*, Paris, 1962, p. 209.

which makes one think of heaven.”<sup>5</sup> The author notes that while writing this, he had in mind the Little Brothers of Foucauld and the Focolare.

In an editorial in *La Civiltà Cattolica*, the writer tries, among other things, to shed light on both the distinction and the link between the two commandments: to love God and love your neighbour. “Love for God and love for one’s neighbour, we read, “were known to Jesus’ contemporaries, because they are found in the Old Testament. (Dt 6:5; Lv 19:18). What characterizes Jesus is the great emphasis he gives to these two commandments above all the others, and the link he makes between them, making them into one double-faceted commandment and placing the love for God as the foundation of the love for the neighbour.

“Jesus gives first place to love for God... He must be loved with absolute totality; that is, “with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Mt 22:27)....

Jesus’ love for his fellow human beings and his willingness to sacrifice himself for them, spring from his love for the Father. In fact, as he is about to face his passion and death he says: ‘so that the world might know that I love the Father and do as the Father has commanded me, let us get up and go out from here.’” (Jn 14:31).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> E. Dhanis, “Le message évangélique de l’amour et l’unité de la communauté humaine”, in *Nouvelle Revue Théologique*, 92, 1970, pp. 186-188.

<sup>6</sup> Cf “Amore di Dio e amore del prossimo”, in *La civiltà cattolica*, 3053, 3 settembre 1977, p. 346-347.