

(English translation)

Rocca di Papa, 24 October 1978

How to Love Our Neighbour (Part II)

How are we to love our neighbour?

It is Christ in us who loves, with charity

Loving our neighbour, every neighbour, as the Holy Spirit taught us to do at the beginning of the Movement, was an authentic revolution. At that time, the Christians we knew who were seeking the way to perfection tended to view their neighbour as an obstacle to reaching God. They based their approach on spiritualities which were good, excellent, but which were primarily suited to those who were called to abandon the world and live in a monastery or a convent. And so, at times, they deformed these spiritualities.

But how could we have fled from other people, when we were called to live among them? The Lord used a special technique to teach us how to love our neighbour, remaining in the world without being of the world. He immediately made us understand that it was possible for us to love our neighbour without falling into sentimentalism or other errors, because it was he himself loving in us, with his charity. We were loving Christ in the other person, but it was also Christ in us who had to love.

And what is charity? As we know, it is a love which comes from above. St. Paul says: “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us” (Rom 5:5). Charity, therefore, is a sharing in the divine *agape* (love). This charity, this love, is spontaneous, always new; it continually finds different ways to express itself. It does not allow itself to be categorized. It invents unforeseeable solutions. The Apostle also tells us: “Be guided by the Holy Spirit” (Gal 5:16). Charity is characterized by unselfishness, initiative, universality, and the gift of oneself to the point of sacrifice.

In loving, a Christian must do as God does: not wait to be loved, but be the first to love. And since Christians cannot do this with God, because he is always the first to love, they do it with their neighbour.

St. John tells us that God loves us, but he doesn’t then conclude – as would have been more logical – that if God has loved us, we ought to love him in return. Instead he says: “Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 Jn 4:11).

It is only because charity is a participation in God’s love (*agape*), that we are able to go beyond natural limits and love our enemies and give our lives for our fellow human beings.

This is why Christian love rightly belongs to the new era, and the new commandment is radically new, and introduces something absolutely new into human history and human ethics. “This love,” writes Augustine, “makes us new, so that we are new persons, heirs of the New Covenant, singers of a new song.”¹

If charity is God’s love shared with us, it is quite different from philanthropy. In fact, Christian love does not look at people from the point of view of their nature, but from the point of view of God’s love for them, because it sees each person as a child of God, as his image.²

Likewise, charity is not mere benevolence. As Leo the Great says: “Earthly benevolence reaches no further than the one it helps. But Christian goodness has as its end its author,” that is, God himself. “Therefore, when we do good, we are doing good to him whom we believe is at work within us.”³

¹ Cf. *La Civiltà Cattolica* 3053, 1977, pp. 351-352.

² Cf. *id.*, pp. 349-350.

³ Leo the Great, *Sermons*, 45, 3 (PL 54, 290).

How Charity Manifests Itself

Now let's see how else this charity manifests itself.

These lines from the Curé d'Ars explain it very well. They seem to echo Paul's hymn to charity:

"You will ask me: but how can we know that we have this beautiful and precious virtue without which our religion is only an illusion?"

"First of all, a person who possesses charity is not proud; he does not love to dominate others; he is never to be heard finding fault with other people's behaviour; he does not love to speak about what others are doing. A person who has charity does not question others people's intentions; he does not believe he can do better than them; he does not place himself above his neighbour. On the contrary, such a person believes that others always do better, and doesn't take offence when a neighbour is preferred over him. Whoever possesses charity remains happy, even when he is despised, thinking that he deserves even more contempt.

"Whoever has charity avoids causing pain to others as much as possible, because charity is a royal mantle which knows how to hide other peoples' mistakes well, and never allows himself to think he is better than them."⁴

According to Vincent de Paul, charity can be expressed by "making ourselves one" with our neighbour, a characteristic of the Movement from its earliest years. "To make ourselves one" means to empty ourselves in order to understand our neighbour and to put ourselves in their situation.

For St Vincent, charity is "to be unable to see a person suffer without suffering with them; or to see someone crying without crying with them. It is an act of love which causes hearts to penetrate one another and to feel what the other feels. It is very different from the actions of those people who do not feel anything when they see the torment of the afflicted and the suffering of the poor.

"The Son of God had a tender heart. They came to call him to see Lazarus and he went. Mary Magdalene got up and ran out weeping to meet him. The Jews followed her, weeping as well. Everyone was weeping. What did the Lord do? He had so much tenderness and compassion in his soul that he wept with them. It was this tenderness of his which caused him to come down from heaven: he saw the human race deprived of his own glory; he was touched by their misfortune. So we too, like him, must be moved by the sufferings of our neighbour and share their sorrow. Oh Saint Paul, how sensitive you were to these sufferings! Oh Saviour, who filled this apostle with your Spirit and your tenderness, grant that we also may be able to repeat with him: 'Who can be sick, and I am not sick with him.'"

"To be Christians and to see our own brother or sister suffering, and not suffer with them, not be sick with them, means to be without charity, to be Christians in name only..."⁵

Listening to these saints, it is evident that we must love with our whole selves. We cannot love with a half measure, or without putting our heart into it. Jesus wants a love which, as St. Luke says, moves us to compassion (see Lk 10:33). We must give ourselves totally to our neighbour and receive them into our hearts.

If a neighbour wrongs us, we must not respond to evil with evil but "overcome evil with good" (Rom 12:21). We must do good to everyone, especially those who share our faith. If we do this, love will more easily become reciprocal. And this mutual love will be of benefit to our brothers and sisters without faith, because it is a witness of God.

Charity, which tends toward reciprocity, has a particular power - the power to build the Christian community. St. Paul writes that "love builds up" (1 Cor 8:1), which means that with Christian love we build up the community. And this was the experience of the Movement at its birth, and it continues to be

⁴ Curé d'Ars, *Scritti scelti*, Roma, 1975, p. 117.

⁵ M. Auclair, *La parola a San Vincenzo de' Paoli*, Roma, 1971, pp. 354-355.

its experience: from being isolated members we have become a community. It is evident that Christian love was at work in the first focolarine.

The Human Being is not a Means for Loving God

Someone might think that in Christianity, people could be exploited as a means for loving God. But this is not so.

The theologian Emile Mersch writes: “Human beings are an end in themselves, an absolute and ultimate value, and even natural philanthropy can reach the point of loving them because of their intrinsic greatness. Could the charity of Christ be less human... and fail to discover in human beings more than a mere means for loving God? Children can certainly be happy and proud to be loved for their parents’ sake. But this is because they *are* in a way their parents.... Yet this should definitely not be the only love they encounter; if it were, they would soon feel not loved, but overlooked....

“Love is truly directed to persons themselves. It does not pass through them in order to go beyond. What would it be seeking beyond persons? From the moment that the Word became flesh, became one with us (see Gal 3:28), we no longer seek God only in a distant heaven, but within each human being as well. He is there... as the inner source of life and divinization.”⁶

Moreover, the *Gaudium et Spes* says that “by his incarnation the Son of God has united himself in some fashion with every human being.”⁷

So when people live charity, what happens to them? Catherine of Siena explains this by revealing to us what the “gentle and loving Word” told her: “Looking at the beauty that I have given the soul, creating it in my image and likeness, observe those who are clothed in the wedding garment of charity adorned with many real and true virtues, and united to me through love. If you were to ask me, ‘Who are they?’ I would answer: ‘They are another me’....”⁸

Charity, therefore, divinizes us, it makes us divine.

⁶ Emile Mersch, *Morale et Corps Mystique*, 3rd ed., Paris, 1949, pp.146-147.

⁷ *Gaudium et Spes*, 22.

⁸ Catherine of Siena, *Dialogo*, 1 in *op. cit.*, p.243.