

PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

By Bishop Joseph L. Hogan

Love, The Moving Power of Life

Forty years ago as a seminarian I started out on my theological odyssey. For four years I wandered through the compact and wide-ranging world of thought of Thomas Aquinas. Twice more — during graduate studies and an extended period of teaching — I have returned to the systematic sweep of Aquinas' speculations on God and His relationship with our world.



Among the sections of his theology which I still cherish are his extensive reflections on the meaning of love as benevolence, as friendship, as virtue, as union. No less cherished are the theologian's poetic moments as, for example, his description of love, "the liquification of the heart."

Over the years I have been exposed to the insights of many other thinkers on this subject. To complete this series of three Advent meditations on the theological virtues, I would like to share the most valuable insights I have been able to glean.

One of the most significant discussions on the nature of love has been offered by Anders Nygren, Swedish theologian and Bishop of Lund. Contrasting Plato and the New Testament, he distinguishes between motivated love (*eros*) and unmotivated or sheer gift-love (*agape*).

The first is an attraction produced in the soul by the value of the beloved. It is a form of love determined by the other's value — a process which fills a certain emptiness in the soul. Motivated love is always directed to something lovable and is based on the attractiveness or "worth" of the one loved. There is a desire for self-fulfillment which marks this type of love.

On the other hand, gift-love (a New Testament concept) is not grounded on the value, merit or lovableness of the beloved. It does not spring from a motive of self-completion. Rather, it is "a going out to," a giving, not a getting, of value. This form of love which does not seek self-fulfillment is characteristic of God, in an absolute sense. It becomes possible in human beings only when God makes one capable of loving, through and in His love. Gift-love is possible through the sharing of God's own life, which is the mystery of grace. Gift-love, then, is characterized by a divine quality — "entirely spontaneous, motivated only by the will to give to share."

For this reason, the New Testament is able to describe not merely the actions of God as motivated by love, but His very being as identified with love. "God is love." Of all the literature ever written within the sacred traditions of humanity, only the New Testament ever came to that realization. Thus, one who receives God's gift-love is capable of loving as — not as much as, obviously — God loves. Consequently, Nygren concludes, the quality of love made possible by grace is a giving love, not a desiring love. It is a love that is spontaneous, unmotivated, unconditional.

A second approach to love is suggested by Paul Tournier, a Swiss psychiatrist who has pioneered in the area of "total healing." Developer of a system of therapy called "healing of persons," he has written extensively of love, its dimensions and attributes. His description of love may be summed up thus: a commitment to look for and develop the hidden best in the beloved. This interpretation of love requires a sense of self-forgetfulness. It calls forth a sensitivity to and an awareness of the other. It demands a sacrificing availability to the one loved. It tends to minimize the sense of self-satisfaction that comes from the act of giving one's love or receiving love in return. The focus of this love is ready and caring availability to the other.

Tournier confesses that he is skeptical about the type of love that is given from an assumption of "gift." He sees such an attitude infected with a degree of arrogance. His analysis aims at focusing on the "availability to the other" — for here the genuine character of love is highlighted.

A third way of understanding love is found in the system of Maurice Nedoncelle, a French priest-philosopher. He sees the essence of love as "a will to mutual promotion." Translated into layman's language, this means that love is a commitment to the beloved in the form of a determination to make the other exist more fully. The stance may be expressed as follows: "I believe in you and in myself, I hope in you, and in myself, my love is my invocation that I address myself simultaneously to you and to me." Thus, from this perspective, love searches for and establishes a dynamically interpersonal support system, in which the "I" and "thou" engage in mutually enhancing dialogue and effect a "We."

Nedoncelle elaborates on the enrichment that derives from such a mutual-for-one-another-ness. His thought borrows much from other philosophers and theologians and it is a remarkable synthesis of what makes for genuine love.

A fourth and final approach is illustrated by one of the most creative and challenging theological thinkers of our century, Paul Tillich. His thought patterns are so compact that they lose much in summation. Let the master speak for himself:

Life is being in activity and love is the moving power of life. In these two sentences the ontological nature of love is expressed. They say that being is not actual without the love that drives everything that is towards everything else that is. In man's experience of love the nature of life becomes manifest. Love is the drive toward the unity of the separated. Estrangement presupposes original oneness. Without an ultimate belongingness no union of one thing with another can be conceived.

What the master theologian is looking at is the nature of "for-other-ness" or the will to community which lies at the heart of the person. It is in the nature of human relatedness that one must root the experience of love. He continues:

Love manifests its greatest power there where it overcomes the greatest separation. And the greatest separation is the separation of self from self. The power of love is not something which is added to an otherwise finished process, but life has love in itself as one of its constitutive elements.

In effect, then, one must not look upon love as a "plus" or an "extra" which somehow is tacked onto life. Love is an affirmation of the very essence of human life.

It is the fulfillment and the triumph of love that it is able to reunite the most radically separated beings, namely individual persons. The individual person is both most separated and the bearer of the most powerful love.

Whichever of the perspectives given above we prefer, we must confess that contemporary thought has brought us up to the mountain of contemplation from which to survey the horizon of love. Whether the starting point for our Advent meditations on love is God's own love, or an outreach to the very core of the other, or proclaimed availability, or the affirmation of our basic human need to experience love as bridgebuilding, we will have enough to carry us through our reflections.

May Advent 1976 see us all growing in and through the love we give and receive.

General Absolution Rite Permissible . . . But

By Carmen Vigulucci

A "day of reconciliation" in Memphis, Tenn. during which 11,500 persons were pardoned for their sins by Bishop Carroll Dozier, in a rite of general absolution has aroused the interest of many Catholics across the country.

Many of those who took part in the two-hour Sunday afternoon ceremony said it was the first time in a number of years that they had been to the sacraments. Bishop Dozier, who began planning the service last June, prescribed the singing of the "Gloria" for penance and those in attendance were told that they would be expected to confess their sins to a priest within "a reasonable time after the liturgy."

Although this diocese has no plans as of now for such a ceremony, diocesan officials pointed out that such general absolutions are possible, indeed have taken place here on a limited basis, but warned strongly against

any misconceptions the public may have about such services.

Father Robert Kennedy, director of the diocesan Department of the Liturgy, said that the general absolution rite in question has been possible in the diocese since the new rite of Penance was instituted about a year ago.

The new rite allows for three reconciliation options — the individual one-to-one with a priest, a communal celebration whereby the liturgy is celebrated communally but confession is still on an individual basis with a priest, and the general absolution.

The latter rite, explained Father Kennedy, is still seen as an exception but not as exceptional as it used to be.

The rite was previously allowed in the event of a disaster, (an epidemic, for instance) the danger of death (soldiers going into battle, for example).

The new rite has broadened this form to include grave need — when there are not enough confessors to hear individual confessions adequately and thus penitents may go too long without "grace," said Father Kennedy.

The point to be stressed here is that "those in serious sin must follow up by confessing grave sins within a year," he said.

The guidelines established by Bishop Hogan allow the scheduling of general absolution in parishes especially during the penitential seasons of Advent and Lent, in resort areas where many vacationers may show up unexpectedly, in one-priest areas where a large number of penitents would appear unexpectedly at a scheduled time, and on special family, parish or community occasions.

In the first instance, the guidelines state that toward the end of Advent and Lent "it may seem

appropriate to schedule general sacramental absolution, especially when it would require extraordinary and unusual measures to summon sufficient confessors for individual forms of the sacrament."

Thus, general absolution services, following the same basic pattern as Bishop Dozier's, have taken place in this diocese, but on a smaller scale.

According to news reports, many of the "alienated" Catholics who attended the Memphis absolution were divorced.

Sister Kathleen Kircher, who heads up the diocesan program for Divorced and Separated Catholics, warned against any erroneous presumptions in this regard.

"When you talk about the 'divorced' you should realize that there are three different groups," Sister Kathleen said. "The divorced who have not remarried, the separated, and the remarried."

"Perhaps the saddest aspect is that there is no reason why the first two groups, the divorced and separated, who have not remarried, should be estranged from the sacraments. They just assume they are. For them such a general absolution rite is ideal," she said.

The third group, the divorced and remarried, constitute a different problem. Sister Kathleen warned against "any false expectations" as far as general absolution in these cases. "A very serious matter cannot be rectified within a half hour," she said.

Father Robert F. O'Neill of the diocesan Tribunal had much the same view. Divorced and remarried persons, he said, "should see a priest and talk over annulment procedures as a first step."

Such persons attending a general absolution rite still face serious canonical problems, Father O'Neill

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