

Love Is Demanding, Difficult — and Attractive

The following is excerpted from the homily given by Pope John Paul II at the Roman parish church of the Ascension of Our Lord.

In the spirit of love, which is the bond of the community and the source of our unity — especially with God Himself in Christ — I greet you cordially, beloved brothers and sisters, who have come from all over the district to bear witness to your affection and devotion to the Pope. I greet also those who would have liked to take part in this meeting, but have been kept at home by illness or by some commitment impossible to postpone. I entrust you with the task of bringing them my greeting and good wishes.



I now wish to reserve a special mention for Auxiliary Bishop Giulio Salimei, who has carried out the pastoral visit in this parish so zealously in the past few days. From him my thought goes spontaneously to the parish priest and the other priests of the presbyterate whom the Council describes as "cooperators with the bishop." They are in your midst to construct a living community which, being nourished with eucharistic Bread and the Word of God, is able to bear witness to Christ with the example of personal consistency and disinterested love.

I would like also to send a special word of greeting to those who are distant, on the psychological plane, from the parish community, for which they harbor sentiments of indifference or even, perhaps, of hostility. Let them know that it is the desire of the pope as well as of the priests of the parish and every other minister of God, to open with them a dialogue which can dispel misunderstandings and permit better mutual knowledge and a thorough discussion of Christ and his Gospel.

Certainly, the message of Jesus is destined to "create a problem" in the life of every human being. We are reminded of this by the readings of today's liturgy, especially the text of the Gospel of Luke, to which we have just listened. It induces us to return in thought once more to the words that a recent Mass has left in our memory. At the moment of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple, which took place on the fortieth day after his birth, old Simeon had spoken the following words about the Child: "This child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against."

Today we are witnesses of the contradiction that Christ met with at the very beginning of his mission in Nazareth. When on the basis of the words of the prophet Isaiah, which he read in the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus made his fellow citizens understand that the preaching referred precisely to Him — that is, that he was the announced Messiah of God — the first reaction was one of amazement, then incredulity, and finally all those who listened "were filled with wrath," and they were unanimously resolved to throw Him down from the hill on which the city of Nazareth was built. But passing through the midst of them he went away.

Then, too, today's liturgy — against the background of this event — lets us hear in the first reading the distant prophet Jeremiah: "They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you to deliver you."

Jesus is the prophet of love — that love which St. Paul confesses and proclaims in the words, so simple and at the same time so profound, of the passage from the letter to the Corinthians. In order to know what true love, and what its characteristics and qualities are, we must look at Jesus, at His life, and His conduct.

Words will never render the reality of love so well as its living model does. Even words, as perfect in their simplicity as those of the first letter to the Corinthians, are only the image of this reality, that is of which we find the most complete model in the life and behavior of Jesus Christ.

In the succession of generations, there have been, and there are, men and women who have effectively imitated this perfect model. We are all called upon to do the same. Jesus came above all to teach us love. It constitutes the content of the greatest commandment He left to us. If we learn to put it into practice, we will reach our purpose: eternal life. Love, in fact, as the Apostle teaches, "never ends." While other charisms and also the essential virtues in the Christian's life end together with earthly life and pass in this way, love does not pass, it never ends. It is precisely the essential foundation and content of eternal life. And therefore "the greatest... is love."

This great truth about love, through which we bear within us the real leaven of eternal life in union with God, must be deeply associated with the second truth

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of today's liturgy: love is acquired in spiritual effort. Love grows in us and develops even among the contradictions, the resistances, that oppose it from within each of us, and at the same time from "without," that is, among the many forces that are alien and even hostile to it.

For this reason St. Paul writes that "love is patient." Does it not so often come up against in us, the resistance of our impatience, and even merely inadvertence? To love it is necessary to be able to "see" the "other," it is necessary to be able to "take him into account." Sometimes it is necessary to put up with him. If we see only ourselves, and the "other" "does not exist" for us, we are far from the lesson that Christ gave us.

"Love is kind," we read further on; not only does it see the other, but it opens up to him, looks for him, goes to meet him. Love gives lavishly and this is just what "it is kind" means (following the example of the love of God Himself, which is expressed in grace). And how often, nevertheless, we shut ourselves up in the shell of our self, we are not able, we do not want, we do not try to open up to the other, to give him something of our own self, going beyond the limits of our self-centered outlook, or even of selfishness, and endeavoring to become men and women for others, following the example of Christ.

And so on, rereading St. Paul's lesson on love and meditating on the meaning of every word that the Apostle used to describe the characteristics of this love, we touch on the most important points of our life and our living together with others. He touches not only on personal or family problems, the ones that is, that have importance in the little circle of our interpersonal relations, but we also touch on social problems of prime importance today.

Are not the times in which we live already a dangerous lesson on what society and humanity can become, when the evangelical truth about love is considered outdated? When it is eliminated from the way of looking at the world and life, from ideology? When it is excluded from education, the media of social communication, culture and politics?

Have not the times in which we live already become a sufficiently threatening lesson on what such a social program has in store?

And may this lesson not become even more threatening as time goes on?

In this connection, are not the acts of terrorism, always renewed, and the growing military tension in the world, already eloquent enough? Every man — and the whole of mankind — lives between love and

hatred. If he does not accept love, hatred will easily creep into his heart and begin to fill it more and more, yielding more and more poisonous fruits.

From the Pauline lesson we have just listened to, it is logically necessary to deduce that love is demanding. It demands an effort from us, it demands a program of work on ourselves — just as, in the social dimension, it demands adequate education and suitable programs of civic and international life.

Love is demanding. It is difficult. It is attractive, certainly, but it is also difficult. And therefore it meets with resistance in man. And this resistance increases when, outside, programs in which the principle of hatred and of destructive violence is present, are in operation.

Christ, whose Messianic mission meets from the very first opposition of his own fellow citizens in Nazareth, reconfirms the truth of the words spoken about Him by old Simeon on the day of the Presentation in the temple: "He is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against."

These words walk with Christ along all the ways of His human experience, up to the cross.

This truth about Christ is also the truth about love. Love, too, meets with resistance, opposition. In us and outside us. But that must not discourage us. True love — as St. Paul teaches — "believes all things" and "endures all things."

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