



# Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

October 1986

## THE LOVE OF GOD

It is the joy of Christians to know the love which God has for them and for all mankind. This love is by no means self-evident. It is part of what is revealed to us about God in Holy Scripture, and especially by the life and teaching of Jesus. Apart from this revelation which God has given us of Himself, we would know next to nothing of His love. The beauty and splendor of creation suggest a loving Creator -- but there is also much evil in the world which suggests to some a Creator who is either not very competent at creating or else downright evil.

God has committed to His Church the stewardship of His self-revelation, not only that all Christians may grow into the full stature of His love, but also that His love might be proclaimed to all people. We too often take this love for granted. We know that it is the foundation for our lives as Christians. We know that apart from it we cannot understand who Jesus is or what He has done for us. Yet so much of the time our spiritual lives seem to be dominated by concerns of a much more mundane sort: distractions, rule of life, finding time for prayer, fighting off temptation, trying to be loving to others. These are all important things to be sure. But without the foundation of the love of God, they are all so much straw. To keep the breath of the Spirit in our Christian lives, we need always to dwell on (and in) the love of God. God's love is mind-boggling in its greatness. It is that which gives meaning and value to all the rest.

So what is God's love for us like?

First, it is God's nature to love, and therefore His love is certain and sure. It is one of the great realities which we may always trust: God is love. He could no more stop loving than that a circle could have corners. Part of the mystery of

the Trinity is that God is eternally loving -- even before the beginning of time and the existence of creatures. Love is essential to His nature. Of course, His love overflows in a mysterious way, which leads Him to create beings outside Himself to share His love. He has made us in order to love us. We need never doubt that God is loving us. The universe would collapse in an instant if God withdrew His love.

God does not stand to gain by His love for us. He does not love us in order to get something out of us that He needs, as sometimes happens with human love. We suspect that love is being offered to us only as a way of getting us to do something which we would not otherwise wish to do. God's love is completely pure in this regard, for He is quite sufficient unto Himself. He doesn't need anything that we have in order to be complete.

God's love for us is infinitely abundant. There is no end to it. This is logical: since God is love, and since He is also infinite, so must be His love. We see intimations of this in the life of Jesus. He manifests His love for everyone He encounters. To take but one example: think of the love which Jesus shows for His mother from the cross, committing her to the care of Saint John. That is a love which thinks of others even in the midst of its greatest pain.

God's love for us is unconditional. It does not depend on our doing something to merit it. While we were yet sinners -- before we even knew that we needed (desperately) God's love, He was loving us. The initiative is all on His part. This frees us from the worry of whether we are good enough to receive God's love. He loves us whether we are worth it or not, simply because it is His nature to love. Indeed, He makes us worthy of His love by loving us. As we recognize our sinfulness, we will not at the same time fear that we have lost the love of God, but rather be increasingly grateful that He loves us in spite of our unworthiness.

God's love for us is a gift. It cannot be purchased but only received. We've experienced this when we have been loved by another person. Think of such a time in your life. The love we received was clearly a gift, something greater than we deserved. It kept coming even when we abused it. As the relationship grew, the other came to know our bad points as well as the good. And then when love was still offered to us, we understood that it was a gift all along, and not something we had earned by being good.

Of course, we try from time to time to earn God's love by doing good deeds which we think will put God in our debt: if I go to church

every Sunday, God will love me, and will have to let me into heaven. He will owe me a life without troubles. We are not usually quite so obvious about it, but we act as if He owed us something because we serve Him. When we begin to think in this way we are brought up short: our sins come out to haunt us, and our illusion of our own goodness is burst like a bubble. Then we are left with the love of God, surrounding us still. We are then freed of our own pretensions to goodness, so that we can receive the gift which is offered.

Jesus shows us that God's love is sacrificial. It loves whatever the cost -- and there is inevitably a cost in love. This too we have learned from our experiences of love in the world. If we love another person, the time will come when we must forgive or stop loving. The other has sinned against us and we have been hurt. If we retain the hurt, we must give up the love. If we wish to continue the love, we must forgive, absorbing the hurt without exacting retribution. Sometimes that can be exceedingly painful. It is never easy.

And yet this is what God's love does for us all the time. Our sins wound God's love, just as surely as our love is hurt by another's sin against us. He does not exact a penalty from us. He pays it Himself. He wills to absorb all of the hurt of all the the sin of all the people in the world: all Himself. He bears the hurt of it all upon the Cross. What wondrous love is this!

The Cross shows us the love which God has for us. There Jesus is willing to die for us -- in our place -- for we deserved to die by reason of our sins. There are perhaps a few people we would be willing to die for, if we were sure they would take advantage of the life we would give them, and if the death was not too painful or humiliating. Jesus died for us in spite of the fact that we didn't recognize what he was doing, in spite of the fact that we have not all accepted the offer of redemption which He makes from the Cross, and in spite of the incredible pain and humiliation which comes with crucifixion. Christ dies for us unbidden: no one asks Him to do it. The outcome is uncertain: one of His own inner circle betrays Him, after all. It is not clear that anyone will respond to His sacrifice by repentance and belief. And yet, He does it, simply because He loves us with all His being. We must dwell on these things if we are to know the love which God has for us.

God's love for us is sacrificial: it is also redemptive. The death of Jesus was not the wasteful, premature conclusion of a promising young life. It was the redemption of the world from the power of sin. It was a cosmic triumph. It established peace between God

and man, where before had been the enmity of sin. It opened to man the gates of heaven, that he might finally come to his true home. It allowed God's love to put away the obstacle man had placed in its way, and so embrace humanity, and exalt it into His own presence. Through sacrifice God's love redeems.

In God's initiative in loving us, in His willingness to sacrifice in order to redeem us, we see that He loves us as a Father loves His children. We learn from Scripture that He is in fact adopting us as sons and fellow-heirs with His Son. He (through Jesus) teaches us to call Him Father, and to treat Him as such. What a glorious privilege this is, which His love allows us! All that we know of a father caring for his children -- feeding them, protecting them, carrying them, providing all that they need whatever the cost -- all this God does for us. We've done nothing to be worthy of such a blessing: it is His gift.

God's love is also non-coercive. It leaves us entirely free -- free even to reject it. He wishes us to respond, but not at the expense of our hearts. Our intended response is to love Him back, because He first loves us. His astounding plan for redeeming the world by His love succeeds when it touches our hearts and we begin to see what He is doing for us. Then we are overwhelmed with gratitude, with the awesome gift that is laid at our feet. God begs us to accept His love, to become His children. He begs to forgive our sins and give us a place in heaven. His love can do no less.

If we are to be good Christians we must know the love of God. We must know it not just intellectually: we must be touched by it in the heart. It must be for us the Great Fact of our lives beside which all else pales. His love will lead us to be Christian in the first place, and it will draw us on as we grow up. It will be a constant source of wonder and joy for us. It will be our motivation in all that we do as Christians -- and eventually all that we do, period.

But just as God's love overflowed into Creation, so it is not meant to stop with us. If we truly know the love of God, we will wish to share this great joy with others. We do this not to prove our own goodness, nor even to get new members for our parish. We do it because God loves us -- and everyone else. What greater gift can we give than to share the love of God with someone who does not know it?

