

Lesson eleven: The Virtue of Charity
Or: Loving as God Loves

The two terms “love” and “charity” are frequently used interchangeably, and with good reason, since the virtue of charity is in fact a kind of love. However, the two are not identical; not all forms of love are also charity. For example, we often hear expressions like, “I love hot chocolate,” or “I love basketball,” or even “I love America,” and these kinds of love, while all good in themselves, still fall somewhat short of the love that is charity.

What sort of love is charity, then? Quite simply, charity is the Love of God, in which we are able to participate. Remember, as we discussed several lessons ago, every theological virtue means a share in God’s activity. Faith, for instance, is a share in God’s act of knowing, whereby the believer knows what God knows. Hope is a share in God’s desire; the person with the virtue of Hope wants the same thing God wants, that is, for the person in question to make it to union with God in Heaven. Charity too is a mode of participating in God’s action, the highest mode, for with Charity we share in God’s act of love; we are able to love the way God loves.

God’s Love: Selfless and Sacrificial

All this begs the question: how *does* God love? What especially characterizes Divine loving? The only way to find the answer is to examine how God loves us. More precisely, we have to reflect on how God manifests His love in the two great moments of Divine love for humanity. Those two moments are Creation and the Incarnation.

Creation might be accurately described as God loving things into existence. He loves you and me, and because of this love we actually come to be. The fact that we are is founded on the fact that God loves us. But why? Why does He love us, why does He give us existence and life and all good things? Is it because God somehow needs us, or because we make Him happier than He would be without us? Would God be less good, or less great, or less joyful if we weren’t around? Absolutely not. God is already, in Himself, infinitely happy, infinitely good, and infinitely great, so it’s inconceivable that we could add to Him in any way.

On the contrary, God doesn’t benefit from creation at all. Supplying creatures with existence is a pure gift, without any gain on His part. Creatures receives everything from the act of creation; the Creator receives nothing from it. From the Divine perspective, creation is an act of love which is totally and in all ways *selfless*.

This love which God bears for humanity is most dramatically exemplified in the mystery of the *Incarnation*. After the human race had responded to divine gifts with ingratitude, pride and disobedience, it was plunged by its own sin into desolation and misery. The world became dominated by physical suffering and death and also by spiritual evil that killed the soul. We had thrown ourselves down the well of sin and sorrow, and we lack the means of getting back out.

Yet out of His vast love, God chose to become man in a staggering act of humility. He goes on to suffer the most horrible agonies, culminating in death on a cross,

and then rises from the dead after three days in the tomb. All this He does for our sakes, even though there was nothing personally for Him to profit from it, and even though we had so disdainfully scorned His gifts of life and love. Here then, we see God loving in a manner that is still selfless, but also excruciatingly *sacrificial*.

Two Kinds of Love

The two chief characteristics of God's love are, therefore, selflessness and sacrifice. Consequently, in the virtue of Charity, our love must embody these two attributes. Of course, the fact that we must be selfless does not imply that we can never consider our own needs and desires. After all, the virtue of hope is based on fulfilling one's own need: "I want to get to Heaven; I need to get to Heaven." Hope is the desire for supernatural good insofar as it will make oneself happy. This is, in itself, completely appropriate, but it must also be complimented by charity, which is the desire for supernatural good insofar as something which will make God and neighbor happy.

To have a proper understanding of selflessness, we must first understand that there are two kinds of love. "Love" itself is often a difficult idea to get a handle on. We tend to use it without any reflection on its precise significance. The broadest definition of love is: *To want some good for someone*. Pretty much every time someone uses the word "love" it involves a movement towards some good thing for some person.

But there are two ways to want some good for someone. *The first way is wanting some good for yourself*. Phrases like "I love Pizza," "I love summer vacation," "I love the Kansas City Chiefs," or "I love being in a romantic relationship," all describe this first kind of love. It's based on wanting one's own happiness. *However, there is also another form of love which involves wanting some good for someone else*. So, for example, if I were to say, "I love my son; I'd do anything for him," it would indicate that what I desire is for my son to be happy. Examples of this second love are the way all parents are supposed to love their children, the way Mother Teresa loved the poor, or the way we are all supposed to love our enemies. It does not refer to concern for our own enjoyment, but rather a willingness to work for someone else's well-being.

Now, these two loves, the first which is self-focused and the second which is other-focused, are complimentary. Ideally, one should experience both. Consider the love between a husband and wife. When the man says, "I love you," to the woman, he normally means a) "You make me happy," and b) "I will try to make you happy." However, if all love is reduced to the first kind of statement, that is, to self-focused love, then love is impoverished and of little worth. Such love will not fulfill, and will eventually collapse. In dealing with those around us, we should strive to foster both forms of love.

The same is true in our relationship with God. In fact, we have already discussed the self-focused love that ought to propel us towards union with God, namely, hope. Hope motivates the Christian to do what is right in order to attain Heaven, which one realizes to be one's everlasting happiness. Charity, however, is the second kind of love, and it motivates the Christian to do what is right in order to bring about the happiness of God and neighbor. In Charity, we say to God and neighbor, "I will try to make you happy, I will try to serve you, I will make your good my priority."

Of course, such a selfless attitude always involves sacrifice. If you've ever made someone else's happiness a priority, then you know it's not easy. In fact, the proof of

charity is measured by sacrifice. If we have a selfless love for God and neighbor, we will be willing to suffer in order to serve them. This is the ultimate test of love, as Our Lord Himself testifies, “No one has greater love than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.”¹

Charity Towards God

What does all this mean practically? How can we concretely practice a selfless and sacrificial love? Well, the first step is to stop thinking about our faith, our religion, and our lives as Catholics as if it was just about us. We have to keep in mind that our number-one purpose in life is to serve God, to please Him. So we must not evaluate our spiritual life based on whether we get anything out of it. Many people do this; they quit praying, or going to confession, or going to mass, because they “don’t get anything out of it.” That’s an indication that they are lacking the virtue of charity, that their relationship with God is fundamentally selfish.

We are supposed to have frequent prayer and frequent reception of the sacraments not based primarily on what we personally get out of it, but because it pleases God, because it makes Him happy. Charity means a willingness to *sacrifice* our time and energy and preferences in order to go to God in prayer and in the sacramental life of mass and confession in order to show our love for Him. That’s the key point: we’re not just doing this for ourselves, but for our Creator, Our Loving Father.

This also means that our prayers should also avoid the tendency to be exclusively self-focused. Often times our prayers include the following phrases: “Give **me** this,” “Help **me** with this,” “Here’s what’s happening in **my** life,” “What should **I** do?” etc... These sorts of prayers are good, necessary, and not to be disparaged. God wants us to tell Him what we need, and what’s going on with us. However there should also be prayers which are focused on God, prayers like: “Thank **You**,” “**You** are so good,” “**You** have done so much for me,” and so on. To keep charity alive, we must remember that prayer is not *just* petition; it’s also praise and thanksgiving.

Charity Towards Neighbor

Again, our standard for charity towards those around us is God’s love. In fact, Christ explicitly told gave us this standard, saying, “A new commandment I give you: love one another as I have loved you,”² that is, selflessly and sacrificially. Consequently, whether we have genuine charity for our neighbors depends on whether we are willing to give selflessly and sacrificially for their sakes. Notice that Our Lord does not offer this principle as advice, but rather as a commandment; we are *obliged* to love selflessly and sacrificially. As Christians, we are *obliged* to spend time with people we don’t enjoy, to be kind to our enemies, to strive for reconciliation with estranged family members, and to show our affection for people we don’t get along with.

It also means that we must learn and practice the Works of Mercy, both corporeal and spiritual. The seven corporeal works of mercy are those which care for the bodily wants of our brothers and sisters. They are: *Feeding the hungry, giving drink to the*

¹ Jn 15:13

² Jn 13:34

thirsty, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked, ransoming the captive,³ caring for the sick and imprisoned, and burying the dead. The chief opportunity for us to lend material aid to those in need is in *giving alms*; our financial donations to help the poor is a critical aspect of fraternal charity, and is a work pleasing to God. Our Lord Himself declares how closely He associates Himself with the poor to whom we are generous, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.”⁴

The seven spiritual works of mercy are those which promote spiritual welfare. They are *instructing, counseling, admonishing, comforting, praying for the living and the dead, forgiving willingly, and bearing wrongs patiently.* So it is actually a work of kindness and charity to explain the faith to someone who is ignorant about it, to correct someone who has sinned, to pray for the poor souls in purgatory, and so forth. These works are just as crucial for our lives as Christians, for we cannot simply focus on serving the body of our neighbors and ignore the needs of the soul.

Perhaps one of the most important applications of the virtue of charity to daily life regards the institution of marriage. Charity demands that if we get married, we continue to love and serve our spouses even if we feel like we can’t stand them another second. It is a shame that in today’s society marriage, like religion, is so often treated as something a person sticks with “as long as it works for him.” Then, when the relationship between spouses becomes unpleasant, the standard response is simply to quit. The Catholic understanding of marriage, by contrast, is one whereby the spouses learn the art of charity through service and sacrifice. The husband should not think about how the wife should be satisfying him, but how he should be laying down his life for her. The same goes for the wife. And of course, this will involve great pain and difficulty. Remember, marriage is founded on the model of Christ’s love for the Church, and Christ showed that love by undergoing excruciating torment and death for the sake of His Spouse. Consequently, to think of a marriage apart from sacrifice is like thinking of Christ apart from the Cross. Such a relationship will be empty, and will lack an enduring foundation of charity.

This final virtue, the virtue of Charity, is the summit of the Christian life and the beginning of everlasting happiness. And yet, in some way, it seems like a kind of inversion of the program with which we began this course. After all, we started out with trying to show how “you” could be happy, that is, through the personal attainment of the basic human goods, and now we’ve ended by saying that the ultimate means to happiness is to focus not on your happiness, but on the happiness of God and Neighbor. To paraphrase John F. Kennedy, “Ask not what God and Neighbor can do for you; ask what you can do for God and neighbor.” Only Charity can ultimately prevent us from becoming locked in our own selfish solitude. Only someone who has put himself at the disposal of those in his life will really be able to open himself up and experience the bliss of ecstasy.

So at last we see that seeking personal fulfillment is not enough; rather we must transcend our own good and act on behalf of the other. To be sure, we cannot stop

³ Note that “ransoming the captive” applies *par excellence* to the pro-life movement, that is, trying to save the babies held captive by the culture of death.

⁴ Mt 25:40.

pursuing the basic goods and eternal happiness, but Charity teaches us not pursue them only for our own sake, but also with an eye to serving God and neighbor. We have to make their happiness our objective if we would ever be truly happy ourselves.