

Agape
6th Sunday of Easter (B)
(1Jn 4:7-10; Jn 15:9-17)

Jesus gives his disciples a New Commandment at the Last Supper: “*Love one another as I have loved you.*” It is new because the standard is himself, and the love he speaks of is not human love, but divine love, *agape*.

The English language is limited by the single word “love,” which can mean many things. In the Greek of the New Testament, however, there are three main words to describe different types of love.

Eros is physical love, the love of things related to the needs of the body and the desires of the flesh (love for food, drink, sex, comfort). *Eros* brings pleasure. It is the most basic kind of love, but it is fundamentally selfish, extending no further than “me” and “my needs.” When we are babies this is the only kind of love we know.

As we grow older, however, and learn to speak and communicate with others, we begin to experience true human love, *Philos*. This is a social love, the love of things related to the needs of the heart, most especially other people. It is friendship and consideration. *Philos* purifies and perfects *Eros*: we no longer simply eat to “stuff our face,” but rather to share a meal together, building relationships; we don’t drink simply to get drunk, but rather to celebrate and have a good time; we don’t simply pursue sexual gratification, but rather “make love.” For the sake of the more noble and true human love, we are ready to sacrifice lower love whenever necessary.

Love, then, (i.e., *Philos*), is not simply the selfish pursuit of pleasure, but rather the pursuit of *happiness*, in which the needs of the heart are satisfied by honorable friendships, and worthy causes. *Philos* is expressed in the feelings, in the emotional life of man, ruled by reason. But just as through sin man can corrupt love and worship *Eros* as a god, living according to the desires of the flesh, so man can be blinded by feelings into loving the wrong thing, or he can lose his resolve when the feelings end. People can “fall out of love” just as easily as “falling in love.” How many marriages fail because people no longer feel love for each other any more? Human love, even the greatest and most perfect, is still in the end a limited and finite love, dependent on human power and strength.

Jesus thus speaks of a different love at the Last Supper, the divine love he knows as the second Person of the Holy Trinity, from his communion with the Father. Jesus loves with the very love of God, and it is to this love that his disciples are called: “*As the Father has loved me, so I love you; remain in my love, as I remain in my Father’s love*” (Jn 15:9-10).

Agape is only experienced by those who are begotten of God (1Jn 4:7-8). It is given by the sacramental grace of Baptism, and it requires God Himself to dwell in the human soul. It is not possible to love divinely through human power. Thus when Jesus commands his disciples to “*love one another as I love you*” (Jn 15:12), it is because his followers will receive the sacramental indwelling which makes it possible. A Christian is able to love by means of the very love of God, and in fact Christians are called (commanded) to love in this way, as Christ loved.

Just as Eros must be purified and perfected by Philo – and sacrificed when necessary, so all human love including Philo, must be purified and perfected, and sacrificed when necessary, by Agape. Neither the desires of the flesh, nor even human happiness, are a sufficient motivation for Christian love. Jesus does not teach us the path to pleasure or happiness. He teaches the way of Agape love, which in fact is the way of the Cross, which is the deprivation of pleasure and happiness. He proclaims “Blessed” the poor, those who mourn, and the persecuted (cf. Mt 5:1-12), because Agape is realized in something much greater than happiness: Joy. “*Rejoice, for your reward will be great in heaven*” (Mt 5:12).

At the Last Supper he says, “*I have told you these things [about Agape] that my joy may be in you, and your joy may be complete.*” Even the pursuit of happiness is selfish in a subtle way, because it is self-interested, and self-fulfilling. Agape on the other hand is self-forgetful, and entirely humble. Joy is the discovery of one’s life and fulfillment in self-giving, by the “going out” of oneself to or for another. “*My spirit exults,*” says the Blessed Virgin Mary (Lk 1:47). Joy is discovered through total self-giving, and this is the love which Christ teaches by his personal example, and by the Cross. In the inner life of the Godhead, Joy is experienced by the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit, who “proceeds” from them both. “*God is love [Agape]*” (1Jn 4:8), and the Holy Spirit literally is the Joy of Agape love.

Divine love begins in the Christian soul through Baptism, but it is fully shared in the Eucharist. When Jesus speaks of Agape at the Last Supper, it is to help the disciples understand what the Eucharist is. In fact, in the early Church the Sunday Eucharist was called “the Agape.” The words of the Eucharist are the words of Agape love: “*this is my body which is given for you... this is my blood which is poured out for you...*” If we wish to fulfill Christ’s new commandment to “*love one another as I have loved you,*” we must learn to speak these words of Agape love (whether vocally or not). Husbands and wives first of all, in their Sacrament of Matrimony, must speak these words, making of their human institution of marriage something divine. They must constantly say to each other (whether verbally or not), “this is my body given for you, this is my blood poured

out for you.” Matrimony must not be selfish, and must not avoid the Cross either. For a Christian, marriage is not about Eros, or Philos, but Agape.

Likewise, as Christian parents they must constantly speak this love to their children. The love of God begins at home through the family, and it is then manifested to the world. Evangelization takes place through the family.

By giving us this New Commandment to “love one another as I love you,” Jesus is commanding us to live what St. Therese of Lisieux will later describe as the “Little Way.” We must not live selfishly, according to the desires of the flesh or even the desires of the heart, but rather according to the principle of self-giving by which we serve God’s will alone and give glory to the Father. Agape does not require us to do “great things” as the world views greatness, but rather on doing the little things with “great love.”

In this season of Paschal death and resurrection of the Lord, let us learn how to “die” to self, in order that we might live for God, and others. Let us learn to love as Christ loves, by means of the grace of the Resurrection we have received in Baptism, and nourished in the Eucharist.