

Learning to Love

A new article in the series on human love. "Our happiness depends on whether we learn to love. To love is the most fundamental command that God has given us."

08/07/2016

Our great calling to love

Our happiness depends on whether we learn to love. 'Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not

revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it.’[1]

To love is the most fundamental command that God has given us: ‘Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and neighbour as yourself.’[2] In this we mirror Christ himself.

To flourish as a human being, in both natural and supernatural terms, requires this life of love. ‘He who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.’[3]

False paradigms of love: impulsive and self-centred choices

‘The term *love* has become one of the most frequently used and misused of words, a word to which we attach quite different meanings,’ wrote Pope Benedict.[4] In a society

dominated by the senses and by a rejection of both rationality and sacrifice, we all too easily can redefine love in impulsive terms.

Love too often is limited to romantic attraction, or a mutual attraction, but this is a very shallow understanding. There are numerous well documented psychological experiments demonstrating that initial attraction can operate at a virtually subconscious level, bypassing genuine human choice and decision making. For example a much publicized study by a Professor Adam Aron demonstrated that in a significant number of cases just a discussion of personal opinions and staring into the eyes of someone of the opposite sex can initiate romantic attachments.^[5] Another study, by Professor David Perrett, demonstrated a subconscious tendency to be attracted to persons of the opposite sex who look most

like ourselves or our parents.[6] On the other hand Lucy Hunt of University of Texas has presented evidence that a time of pre-romantic acquaintance leads to greater mutual knowledge of each other's personalities and physical attraction becomes less significant; such romances are more likely to last.[7]

At the heart of an overemphasis on one's emotions there can be a lack of formation in temperance and fortitude. As a consequence, when passions and emotions are involved there is an inability to think clearly. This is not a new problem of course; Homer even described Aphrodite as the 'slave of her passions.' If passions and emotions are not well managed they take away our capacity to see reality. The habit of temperance is the habit of seeking pleasure in a way that is deeply rational and fulfilling; the habit of fortitude is the habit of overcoming fear for a good

reason. The foundations of these habits are best instilled when a child is very young through obedience to the reason of its parents – Aristotle explained that if a child has learned to obey the reason of its parents when it is small, it is able to obey its own reason when it is older... but how many teens and young adults cannot tell themselves what to do either when their alarm clock goes off or, more seriously, when drugs, alcohol, sex, or gambling are involved. Fear of failure or discomfort holds us back from throwing ourselves into good causes, and an overarching hankering after previously experienced pleasures distracts us from what we should be doing. Past behaviours predispose us to future behaviours, and where our thoughts go, our actions, all too indiscriminately, can follow.

Yet even more seriously, human beings become incapable of love

when they approach life in an egotistical manner. Unbridled passions are a serious enough problem, but a flawed world view of self-centred entitlement altogether another. Philosopher Joseph Pieper says that it is very difficult to hide a lack of temperance or fortitude but self-centredness can be much harder to spot. Our culture enshrines individualism and self-affirmation: how quick we can be to post photos of ourselves, to offer our smug opinions, to sit in judgement, to write others off or to force compliance rather than by respecting, and winning over, hearts and minds, and how slow we can be to listen to others, to notice concerns, to give our time. In a family this is devastating: spouses and children alienated, and grandparents left to their own loneliness.

This deeper misunderstanding of love derives from a profound lack of

formation in justice. We have a duty to measure all we do by its impact on those around us. Think of the example of Our Lady, the perfect mother, who asks the child Christ (who is nevertheless faultless), 'Think what anguish of mind thy father and I have endured searching for thee.'^[8] Her whole educational focus is to instill self-management based on self-knowledge and awareness of duties to others. And when her son's reply is beyond her understanding she does not seek to have the last word.

What then is love?

In *Deus caritas est*, Pope Benedict spoke of three different types of love:

- *eros*, 'that love between man and woman which is neither planned nor willed, but somehow imposes itself upon human beings.'

- *philia*, ‘love of friendship’ that is best typified by Jesus’ love for his disciples.
- *agape*, a sacrificial love that, for the benefit of another, freely puts up with inconvenience and discomfort, even death:
‘Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.’[9]

Benedict observes that the New Testament writers avoid the word *eros* when writing of love and that in using the word *agape* there is a ‘new vision of love’, ‘something new and distinct about the Christian understanding of love.’[10] He argues that *eros* needs to mature into a love of *agape* ‘for otherwise *eros* is impoverished and even loses its own nature,’ and that this new relationship of love is characterized

by both giving and receiving. 'Anyone who wishes to give love must also receive love as a gift.'[11] Love properly speaking can only exist between persons who are therefore capable of reciprocal self-giving, who deeply care for and respect each other. Such love should be guided by truth, by an accurate assessment of another, and enriched by emotion.

True love then, requires sacrifice. We are called to love as Jesus loves us, giving his life for our good, and even now, in the language of the Eucharist, giving himself to us utterly. 'Love of God and love of neighbour are ... inseparable, they form a single commandment. Both live from the love of God who has loved us first.'[12]

Fortunately, family and marriage are schools of such love, where we learn to give of ourselves in love for others,

and to receive also the love of others. In a family, love for others is the most natural motivation for service; how well this prepares us to respond to God's love. 'Their parental love is called to become for the children the visible sign of the very love of God, "from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named."[13]

Virtues empower us to love

Our life is incarnate, embodied. Emotions are intrinsic to our being. Without an emotional life that is integrated profoundly into our intellectual life, we cannot love well and wisely. Emotion driven responses such as unbridled anger, impatience, gluttony, lust, giving up when things get tough, all wreak havoc in the interpersonal realm. Passions and emotions are neither good nor bad but must be at the service of knowing and loving as a

human person. What we do in our bodies and our emotional lives must impact on our whole personalities, on our happiness, on our soul.

‘Human love hence embraces the body, and the body also expresses spiritual love. Therefore, sexuality is not something purely biological, rather it concerns the intimate nucleus of the person.’^[14] Pope Benedict XVI in *Deus caritas est* wrote: ‘It is the person, a *unified* creature of body and soul, who loves.’

It is the virtues that effect this integration of the emotional and rational dimensions of our personality. Maturity is nothing else than this state of virtue.

Integrity of life then is the consequence of the cardinal virtues which all need to be present in each of our actions. It is the inner order, the correct relationship between

rationality and passions. With temperance and fortitude we have the habitual dispositions we need in our emotional life so that through prudence our reasoning is founded on reality, and through justice we take others into account in all we do.

- Prudence plays a guiding role. St Thomas understands prudence as the perfection of conscience, the habitual readiness to make decisions based on reality, the recognition that the goal of our lives is to love good and accomplish it. It is the source of sincerity and humility.
- Justice is a second great prerequisite: the habitual recognition of our duties to others, first of all to God but also to family members, friends and all mankind. Justice is the source of generosity, piety and religious and filial duty.

- Fortitude and Temperance are habitual emotional responses without which, our reason is easily highjacked. They are the well-established habit of accepting the guidance of reason in our sense desires and in our aversion to difficulties.

In summary, the purpose of virtue is to enable us to better reach reality and to respond wisely with choices of love. Temperance and fortitude free us from the distorting effects of our own self centredness, our fears and distractions. In a context of well governed emotions prudence transforms knowledge of truth into decisions. In the light of justice, those decisions are choices of love for others. The more we interiorly struggle to be virtuous, the more easily we connect with others, the better our choices in relationships, the better our choices in life, the

more able we are to seek God, and the happier we are.

Grasp of the truth empowers us love. The more we know someone the more we can love them. In *Love and Responsibility* Saint John Paul II argued that love is 'always a mutual relationship between persons', in fact, 'the unification of persons' and it is the 'authentic commitment of the free will of one person (the subject), resulting from the *truth* about the other person.'[15]

Pope Francis stressed in *Lumen Fidei*: 'If love needs truth, truth also needs love ... If love is not tied to truth, it falls prey to fickle emotions and cannot stand the test of time. True love, on the other hand, unifies all the elements of our person and becomes a new light pointing the way to a great and fulfilled life. Without truth, love is incapable of establishing a firm bond; it cannot

liberate our isolated ego or redeem it from the fleeting moment in order to create life and bear fruit ... Without love, truth becomes cold, impersonal and oppressive for people's day-to-day lives ... One who loves realizes that love is an experience of truth, that it opens our eyes to see reality in a new way, in union with the beloved.'[16]

This is true also for supernatural realities. To respond to natural realities we need prudence, but to respond to supernatural realities we need the light and gift of faith. Truth has its own attractive force... in both natural and supernatural realms. Hence, the stronger our faith the more we love.

The cardinal virtues form a foundation for supernatural life, disposing us to seek truth and think clearly, with all the integrated resources of our head and our heart.

We respond to revealed truths in a way that is neither shallow and sentimental, nor impersonal and cold. The greater our habit of seeking truth, the more avidly we are drawn to revealed truth; the greater our habit of loyalty and trust towards those who love us, the more the gift of hope can take root in our souls.

We are perfected by the supernatural virtues. Charity is the culminating virtue whereby we are made capable of loving God and of loving others in God. A Christian loves in this pure way. Only the pure of heart, those who love God first in everything, can see God working in the world and in their lives and families. Truth and love, faith and charity, are interdependent.

Thus, we become the persons that God wishes us to be, has designed us to be, enriched with his life. More and more we become persons open to

reality, the truth about ourselves and others, and about God and our relationship to him. We become capable of responding to this truth with gratitude and self-giving. We learn to love, and we are able to teach others and the children in our care to love well. The prerequisite foundation for all this is the life of moral and supernatural virtue.

Andrew Mullins

apjm.vic@gmail.com

[1] St John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, 10.

[2] Luke 10:27.

[3] 1 John 4:16.

[4] Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 2.

[5] Aron, A., Melinat, E., Aron, E. N., Vallone, R., & Bator, R. (1997), 'The experimental generation of interpersonal closeness: A procedure and some preliminary findings.' in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 23, 363-377.

[6] See Perrett's website at www.perceptionlab.com.

[7] Hunt, L. L., Eastwick, P. W., & Finkel, E. J. (in press), 'Leveling the playing field: Acquaintance length predicts reduced assortative mating on attractiveness' in *Psychological Science*.

[8] Luke 2:48.

[9] Ephesians 5:1-2.

[10] *Deus Caritas Est*, 3.

[11] *Deus Caritas Est*, 7.

[12] *Deus Caritas Est*, 18.

[13] Ephesians 3:15; John Paul II,
Familiaris Consortio, 14.

[14] Pontifical Council for the Family,
*The truth and meaning of human
sexuality* (1995).

[15] Karol Woytyla, *Love and
Responsibility*, San Francisco:
Ignatius (original Polish edition:
1960), 123.

[16] Pope Francis, *Lumen Fidei*, 27.

pdf | document generated
automatically from [https://opusdei.org/
en/article/learning-to-love/](https://opusdei.org/en/article/learning-to-love/) (01/21/2026)