

Love

by Charles Reutemann, FSC

As we grow older and more adult, the realization suddenly strikes us that in our lives it is not what we do (over which many times we cannot have complete control) but what we are (over which we have much control) that counts. And of all the things that we are or can be, I think that our times, our instinct, our desperation, our deepest desires, the person of Jesus - - all invite us to become warmly loving persons.

Love is an exhaustive topic; but in this paper let us try to isolate a few of its complexities.

First of all, love - - any love - - is built on faith in a person. And faith is an attitude of mind, something not quite reasoned to, something that is an awareness, an intuition discovered in and rooted in a person. In human faith, faith between humans, there is a discovery that is gradually learned: I know you, I rely on you despite everything and most of all despite your changeableness, I have faith in you. All human relationships, and especially the most intimate, are built on faith in the other. Similarly, in what we call God-faith, there is an awareness, something not quite reasoned to but nonetheless real and persuasive and impelling. And it is personal, for, one senses that there is someone who knows me, who is interested, and to whom I can make a response. And, in turn, this response is trust, reliance, and a no-matter-what attachment.

In order that faith remain strong, it needs support. This is the role of love. (Of course, love plays more than a role - - it is a whole style of life). Faith is first; but it leads to and is supported by love. Love without faith in the other is probably mere passing emotion, something grass root - - quickly burnt off. And, just as our *faith* in God works itself out in the human situation, in a living-relating with the neighbor, so too our love of God works itself out only with what we call the neighbor. We have heard this so often: "And he said, a *new* law I give you - - not to love God, not to love

me, Jesus - - but to love one another." "You say you love God and not your neighbor? How can you say that - - it is a lie." The neighbor is my immediate neighbor, especially those who are of the faith. St. Paul says: "Work good to all *men*, but especially to those who are of the household of the faith." Or again, when he speaks lovingly to the faithful Romans: "I *long* to see you, that I may impart some spiritual grace unto you to *strengthen* you, that is, that among you I may be *comforted* with *you* by that *faith* which is *common* to us both, yours and mine." (Rom 1, 12). It is not easy to be a Christian; and no one could remain one without the supporting love of his brothers in the faith. It is not easy to be what is called a "religious"; and no one can remain one without the supporting love of his brothers. It takes great faith to be a religious; but to be a faithful religious we need the supporting love of those who are of the household of the same faith. And we who are this, seek to love one another not simply because of an *esprit de corps* or a loyalty to the group (and still less because of some superficial attractiveness that we find in one another), but because we recognize in each other this element of a shared faith. It is a strange and interesting thing that our bond of love is rooted in our faith response; and that conversely, we can't hold onto this faith unless we are supported by one another's love. (Men give up because they

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are not supported.) They go together. Obviously, we do not love one another because we come from the same flesh, or the same race, or the same geographical location, but because somehow or other God has touched us, is even in us; and we communicate, in a kind of radiating way that we are responding to this experience. Moreover, we recognize that our love, which is generated by this awareness, is something special, because our awareness is something special - - it is built on faith-awareness. This is the first characteristic of love for one another in community.

Secondly, like all love, love for one another is personal. We reach beyond the exterior into the depths of a person. I find *you* interesting. Here the emphasis is on the *you*. And you find *me* interesting. I am *me* and you've discovered me beyond the superficial. Notice that the love is direct. We don't love one another by bouncing off of a love for God. We love one another directly, and in this love - - in this one whom we love - - we discover God. God is discovered in the neighbor and God is deeply loved in the love in the neighbor. We can only *really* love persons; and the only persons we know are the neighbor. That is why love always presupposes an encounter; and an encounter is a mutual awareness: *you* and *me*.

Thirdly, love is a surrender - - and this is very much of the heart of the thing. I suspect that among us there is an area of difficulty. The mechanics of surrender is rooted in the notion of acceptance. When I can really accept the other in the totality of his being as he sees himself, then I will find that I have surrendered (or given all my responsiveness - - given myself) to that totality of his being. John Macquarrie refers to this when he says: "Love does indeed lead to community (union), but to aim primarily at uniting the other person to oneself, or oneself to him, is not the secret of love and may even be destructive of genuine community. Love is a letting-be, not of course in the sense of standing off from someone or something, but in the positive and active sense of enabling-to-be." What he is saying here is that love seeks to allow the other to be, and in so being to grow out, to fully realize all that he can be, to give him space to open out. Frequently what we do is to set up a block to this by projecting an image of what he ought to be, maybe even an image of what we think we ought to be and transferring it to the other. Parents frequently do this with their children, and they block the being of their children, and they frustrate love. There is no love without surrender to the goodness or being of the other as he sees himself; and in this responsive surrender, the other can breathe and grow freely.

Allied to this is the feeling of loneliness and its relation to love. Loneliness is a very painful void inside of ourselves that becomes an unbearable prison. We know that our loneliness can be filled only by the love of others. We seek to fill this void, to satisfy this hunger . . . we go out to find others who will love us, or, as Eugene Kennedy says: to get

others to like us. The paradox is this, that if we seek to fill the void of our own loneliness in seeking love from others, we will inevitably find no consolation but only a deeper desolation. We become, as C. S. Lewis says: ". . . those pathetic people who simply want friends and can never make any. The very condition of having friends is that we should want something else besides friends." Love can accept the the solution, but we must face the fact that to be loved, we must become lovable; and, if I seek to satisfy my own need, if I seek the love which I need, I am really self-centered and not lovable. If however, I seek not to receive love, but rather to give it, I shall become lovable and will most certainly be loved in the end. Love is a letting-be of the other, and at the same time a going out to the other.

Fourthly, sometimes love or charity is equated with kind words or kind acts. But, indeed these are not love - - they follow, but they are not love. A man may try to love his neighbor by kind words or kind acts, but he will not really succeed. The relation can well become forced and artificial, and the neighbor will sense it. "And if I should distribute all my goods to feed the poor . . . and have not love . . ." Kind acts and love are two things; they go together; but they are two. They come afterwards; much as works follow faith (Luther saw that).

Fifthly, love for one another has to be warm. Love is charity, a *caritas* which makes our neighbor "Carus", dear to us. True love is tender; Christ had compassion; Christ said "Weep not"; the love discourse at the Last Supper breathes tenderness. The Cure of Ars has said that the saints have "liquid hearts," which is tenderness. On Pentecost we ask the Holy Spirit of love to "Bend the stubborn heart and will; melt the frozen, warm the chill". The Spirit is fire and warmth. Love for one another must have the subtle quality of warmth if it is to support faith in the other. There is a certain generous unbounding quality to love. "Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb? Even should she forget, I will never forget you."

Sixthly, there has to be something physical about love - - some aspect of physicality. We are body-spirit, and intercommunion in love must reflect this. Perhaps physical nearness or the physicality of our words or gestures or laughter or smile satisfies this most important facet of love. (The *abraco* in Mexico). It is interesting that Jesus, in loving concern, when He performed a cure, was not content merely to say the cure (which He could well have), but he stretched out his hand and *touched* the man saying: "I will, be thou made clean." Or he *placed his hands* on the eyes of the blind man; or he *took the hand* of the daughter of Jairus; or he touched the body of the widow's son. There must be something physical about our love for one another - - not gross - - but nonetheless physical.

There is a great risk in love, for it implies a giving up or a

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going out of self that can only be called renouncement or non-self-possession. Sister Beha says: "To love anyone is to become vulnerable; to become lovingly open to all is to multiply indefinitely the possibilities of being wounded." Loving is a dangerous thing, for one can get hurt - - especially if one encounters a wall or a turn-off. It hurts very much to encounter a wall. It is much safer to draw in on one's self and guard against this fearful thing; but perfect love casts out fear. It takes courage, inventiveness and resourcefulness in order to love.

Well, undoubtedly we could go on. So complex and many-faceted is this vital mainspring of human reality that one invariably winds up doing what Paul did in his letter to the Corinthian people, that is, listing all things that love is: "This love of which I speak is slow to lose patience - - it looks for a way of being constructive. It is not possessive; it is neither anxious to impress nor does it cherish inflated ideas of its own importance. Love has good manners and does not pursue selfish advantage. It is not touchy. It does not keep account of evil, or gloat over the wickedness of other people. On the contrary, it is glad with all good men when truth prevails. Love knows no limit to its endurance, no end to its trust, no fading of its hope; it can outlast anything. It is, in fact, the one thing that still stands when all else has fallen."