

STATIO CONFERENCE

LOVE OF GOD AND NEIGHBOR

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“Christians have ‘far to go’ if they seek to be known for their love of God and neighbor.”

I. Introduction

The address of Pope Francis in his general audience in St. Peter’s Square, June 12, 2013 places us right away into the statio theme of this month.

“The first law governing the church as the ‘People of God’ is love”, Pope Francis continues, “which means recognizing God as the only Lord of life and, at the same time, welcoming others as true brothers and sisters, overcoming divisions, rivalries, misunderstandings and selfishness.”

“How good it is to have this law. How much good it does us to love one another, in spite of everything. Yes, in spite of everything!”

II. Love of God

This writer cannot presume that she is knowledgeable about the topic. There are far better, more extensive and in depth articles, books and publications expounding on the love of God and love of neighbor. In this paper, I humbly invite you as we try to understand the law of love. There is no other way than by looking into the life of Jesus Himself. Let us follow Him teaching in the midst of the people. We see that when He was asked by one of the scribes- “Which commandment is the first of all?”, Jesus answered: “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

Love for God and love for one’s neighbor were known to Jesus’ contemporaries, particularly those who questioned Him, i.e., the scribes, the Pharisees and the chief priests who were supposed to be masters of the Law. What is characteristic about Jesus is the great emphasis he gives to these two commandments over all the others, and the bond he puts between them into one double-faceted commandment and placing the foundation for love of neighbor in one’s love for God. Jesus gives pre-eminence to love for God...he must be loved with absolute totality: that is, “with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind” (Mt 22:37)

Jesus’ love for his fellow human beings and his willingness to sacrifice himself for them spring from his love for the Father. In fact, as he is about to face his passion and death he says: “But for the world must know that I love the Father and do as the Father has commanded me. (Jn 14:31) The words of our Lord in the Gospel are a clear reminder that the whole Christian approach to life can be very much simplified: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your

heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself...Do this and you will live” (Lk 10:28)

We are enabled to love God and others because of the love God pours into our hearts. God is always there, ready and waiting so as to fill our hearts with love. We humans often take the long road and miss the signs laid out before us. The journey takes long before we can be so completely immersed in God’s love and be saturated in godliness.

III. A Long Way To Go

How can we be saturated in godliness so as to let God’s love to flow like a stream and running over? Spiritual writers show us one way, a very simple way . It is by looking at the experience of great men and women of constancy in prayer and wholeness in living and of loving. How do we learn from their way of life, a way of loving God with so much passion and deep love, albeit at times hidden and unnoticed?

a. St. Scholastica’s Life of Loving

Our holy mother St. Scholastica is known to be a woman of deep faith and love. Commentaries on her life, especially from the dialogues of St. Gregory the Great say St. Scholastica could do even more that his twin brother could do. In their famous last encounter, Benedict’s twin sister begged God in a simple and childlike manner to keep Benedict in the monastery so that they could continue their exchanges on heavenly things. Her love was so great that she could move the heart of the Creator and let creation work in her favor. In her life, St. Scholastica showed total dependence on her loving and gracious God.

b. St. Therese and her Little Way

"Little things done out of love are those that charm the Heart of Christ... On the contrary, the most brilliant deeds, when done without love, are but nothingness." writes St. Therese of Lisieux in her auto biography. "We must do all that lies in our power; we must give without counting the cost; we must constantly renounce ourselves. In one word, we must prove our love by all the good works we can perform; but, since all that we can do is very little, it is of the greatest importance that we put our confidence in Him who alone sanctifies those works and that we recognize that we are indeed useless servants, hoping that the good Lord will give us through grace all that we desire."

c. Julian of Norwich, Messenger of Beauty and Joy

Julian of Norwich, according to Austin Cooper, OMI, says that we are called to “go on knowing and loving until...”. This suggests some blend or harmony between praying and living, and between contemplation and action. And we must “go on” with the task of seeking this harmony. A great deal of the life of the committed Christian must be a persevering and loving devotion to the ordinary round of duties and common tasks. On the surface it appears as a dull routine, something perhaps of a “straightjacket.” Yet it does bring its own strange freedom and joy; it liberates us from a trivial dependence on our own fluctuating feelings and changing, unpredictable moods. It does mean that we leave all these changing tides open to the gentle influence of God in a very personal and deliberate way. In loving, a Christian must do as God

does: not wait to be loved, but be the first to love. And since he or she cannot do this with God because he is always the first to love, the Christian puts this into practice with each neighbor. St. John tells us that God loves us, but he does not conclude—as would have been more logical—that if God has loved us, we ought to love him in return. Instead he says: “Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 Jn 4:11).

d. St. Catherine the Great Lover

Catherine of Siena, the great lover, was asked what it is that we can give that we can give God. She responded that the only thing we can give God that would have any value to God is to love others who are as unworthy of our love as we are of God’s love.

e. Raissa Maritain, a Modern Mystic

Raissa Maritain in her prayers written in 1916 and 1917 wrote, “It seems to me that God is forming my heart to charity; to humility...If I do not accept what my neighbor teaches me, God will not teach me either. ...Not to see in my neighbor anything but the love with which God loves him, and his wretchedness as a creature which is no greater than my own wretchedness and which makes God himself pity us and draws down his mercy on us. ...I want my neighbor to have a shelter in my heart as I myself want to find a shelter in the compassionate Heart of Jesus.”

f. St. Benedict, the Man of God

Our holy Father Benedict’s admonition in RB 72 :11 “ Let them prefer nothing whatever to Christ, ” means putting Christ first in one’s life, keeping Him in our gaze whose gaze first and foremost is always upon us; constantly being mindful of Christ. RB 4:2 “ the love of Christ must come before all else”. Nothing takes first place before Christ. It is being single minded. It is a driving force in one’s life. It is being on fire with the love of God.

We often sing ... “O Lord, You are the Center of my life, I will always praise you, I will always serve you, I will always keep you in my sight...” How do we keep and maintain our priorities ; remain single minded in the midst of so many concerns to be attended to and the demands of our day to day relations and dealings with one another? How do we stay mindful of God? How can I let myself be absorbed in God?

Here let me just make a little excursus into mindfulness which actually will be dealt with in next April’s statio. Let us turn our attention to the cover story of a recent issue of TIME magazine, (February 3, 2014), *The Mindful Revolution*. The writer herself is taking part in a curriculum called *Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction* (MBSR) developed in 1979 by Jon Kabat-Zinn, an MIT-educated scientist. The techniques and exercises, including meditation, are intended to help practitioners quiet a busy mind, becoming more aware of the present moment and less caught up in what happened earlier or what is to come. Many cognitive therapist commend it to patients as a way to help cope with anxiety and depression. More broadly, it’s seen as a means to deal with stress. For in this age of technology’s galloping inventions, we have all the means to stay in tune but easier than ever to fracture attention into smaller and smaller bits.

Religious life is not exempted from this. With the gadgets that are allowed for our use, they can connect us with a call in our mobile phones while having community meals; or answer a

teacher's query while having recreation; make an appointment while stuck in traffic; distracted during lectio by the *blip blip* of our cell phones; correct exam papers while watching a telenovela, etc. In a time when no one seems to have enough time, our devices allow us to be many places at once—but at the cost of being unable to fully inhabit the place where we actually want to be.

The Art of Being Mindful, of finding peace in a stressed-out digitally dependent multi-tasking culture might not have been the world of our father St. Benedict. But the historical situation he found himself—the lure of worldly attractions for selfish satisfactions, the destruction after the fall of Rome, the reconstruction and rehabilitation of lives, property and civilization were surely enough distractions for the young man Benedict and his followers. How to focus energy and attention on what matters most needed discipline, the discipline of prayer, work and relationships in the cenobium, in the school of the Lord's service. "Let them prefer nothing whatever to Christ." RB 72:11. Nothing takes place before him. He is the center of the monk's life.

Perhaps we Christians, especially we religious and Benedictines, need to give much more thought to this call to persevere, and to stir up within ourselves the grace this call gives. The real test and witness of a specifically Christian love comes when we remain faithful to the task, no matter what tangents lure us aside. A real Christian love will mean that we battle through dryness, distraction, and dislocation and remain faithful to the tasks, the prayer, and the people who have a claim on us. It is at this level that our fidelity resembles God's fidelity; it is always there, whether it is appreciated, reciprocated, or rejected. A perseverance in prayer, to simply "go on knowing and loving until..." must surely lie at the heart of our quest for such a godly fidelity. We do not journey alone in this quest. We have companions on the journey, my neighbor, my community members, my fellow workers in the school of the Lord's service.

IV. Love Your Neighbor

But who is my neighbor? Jesus answered in the Parable of the Good Samaritan saying that your neighbor is not just the person who lives on your street — it's *whoever* you happen to stumble upon as you go about your daily life.

If we take a closer look at the parable of the Good Samaritan (cf. Lk 10:25-37) we see that it offers two particularly important clarifications. Until Jesus' time, the concept of "neighbour" was understood as referring essentially to one's countrymen and to foreigners who had settled in the land of Israel; in other words, to the closely-knit community of a single country or people. This limit is now abolished. Anyone who needs me, and whom I can help, is my neighbour. It is significant that Jesus concludes with a different question: Which of the three made himself a neighbor? (v. 36) It is as if he said: do not try to figure out who is your neighbor, listen instead to the all within you, and become a neighbor, be close to your brother or sister in need. As long as we see the command to love as an obligation, we do not love as God wants. Love does not consist simply by being moved by another person's distress. We read how the Samaritan stopped by in spite of being a dangerous place, how he paid for the expenses and promised to take care of whatever else might be necessary. Instead of 'just being charitable' he took unconditional and uncalculated risks for a stranger. With this example, Jesus also makes us see that, many times, those who seem to be religious officials, or who believe they fulfill the law,

are incapable of loving. It was a Samaritan, considered a heretic by the Jews, who took care of the wounded man. (Christian Community Bible, p.173).

Referring to the same story, Martin Luther King pointed out that love is not satisfied with comforting those who suffer: “To begin with, we must be the good Samaritan to those who have fallen along the way. This, however, is only the beginning. Then, some day we will necessarily have to realize that the road to Jericho must be made in such a way that men and women are not constantly beaten and robbed while they are travelling along the paths of life.”

The concept of “neighbour” is now universalized, yet it remains concrete. Despite being extended to all humankind, it is not reduced to a generic, abstract and undemanding expression of love, but calls for my own practical commitment here and now. Lastly, we should especially take to heart what the great parable of the Last Judgment (cf. *Mt 25:31-46*) want to instill in us, in which love becomes the criterion for the definitive decision about a human life's worth or lack thereof. Jesus identifies himself with those in need, with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and those in prison. “As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (*Mt 25:40*). Love of God and love of neighbour have become one: in the least of the brethren we find Jesus himself, and in Jesus we find God.

The unbreakable bond between love of God and love of neighbour is emphasized. One is so closely connected to the other that to say that we love God becomes a lie if we are closed to our neighbour or hate him altogether. Saint John's words should rather be interpreted to mean that love of neighbour is a path that leads to the encounter with God, and that closing our eyes to our neighbour also blinds us to God.

True, no one has ever seen God as he is. And yet God is not totally invisible to us; he does not remain completely inaccessible. God loved us first, says the *Letter of John* quoted above (cf. 4:10), and this love of God has appeared in our midst. He has become visible in as much as he “has sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him” (*1 Jn 4:9*). God has made himself visible: in Jesus we are able to see the Father (cf. *Jn 14:9*). He has loved us first and he continues to do so; we too, then, can respond with love. God does not demand of us a feeling which we ourselves are incapable of producing. He loves us, he makes us see and experience his love, and since he has “loved us first”, love can also blossom as a response within us.

Love of neighbour is thus shown to be possible in the way proclaimed by the Bible, by Jesus. It consists in the very fact that, in God and with God, I love even the person whom I do not like or even know. This can only take place on the basis of an intimate encounter with God, an encounter which has become a communion of will, even affecting my feelings. Then I learn to look on this other person not simply with my eyes and my feelings, but from the perspective of Jesus Christ. His friend is my friend. Going beyond exterior appearances, I perceive in others an interior desire for a sign of love, of concern. This I can offer them not only through the organizations intended for such purposes, accepting it perhaps as a political necessity. Seeing with the eyes of Christ, I can give to others much more than their outward necessities; I can give them the look of love which they crave. Here we see the necessary interplay between love of God and love of neighbour which the *First Letter of John* speaks of with such insistence. If I

have no contact whatsoever with God in my life, then I cannot see in the other anything more than the other, and I am incapable of seeing in him the image of God. But if in my life I fail completely to heed others, solely out of a desire to be “devout” and to perform my “religious duties”, then my relationship with God will also grow arid. It becomes merely “proper”, but loveless.

Only my readiness to encounter my neighbour and to show him love makes me sensitive to God as well. Only if I serve my neighbour can my eyes be opened to what God does for me and how much he loves me. The saints—consider the example of Blessed Teresa of Calcutta—constantly renewed their capacity for love of neighbour from their encounter with the Eucharistic Lord, and conversely this encounter acquired its realism and depth in their service to others. Love of God and love of neighbour are thus inseparable, they form a single commandment. But both live from the love of God who has loved us first. No longer is it a question, then, of a “commandment” imposed from without and calling for the impossible, but rather of a freely-bestowed experience of love from within, a love which by its very nature must then be shared with others. Love grows through love.

The neighborhood of our relationships with family, friends, co-workers, and acquaintances is the practical context in which we learn what it really means to love God. We get to see to what extent God’s love really lives in us by how much it shows in our *character* as we relate with the people in our circle of influence. It’s easy to talk about loving the Lord but am I really doing this? It’s easy to roll up my sleeves for a special project and serve God by helping the needy but what kind of person am I actually in daily life, even when no one is watching?

To love our neighbor is to seek what is good for him or her. It’s to be kind and patient with the people we live and work with. It is to be generous to strangers that we happen upon at the grocery store or along the pergola or riding in the jeepney. It is the “Little Way” that St. Theresé of the Little Flower wrote about centuries ago and it’s “The Winning Shot” in life — rarely applauded by people, but always applauded by angels and saints who give praise to God when they see the eternal Christ of love reflected in our little, unnoticed and hidden gestures.

Love God and love your neighbor as yourself — the two sides of Jesus’ Greatest Commandment go together so that you can’t truly do one without the other (Mark 12:30-31). I can’t love my neighbor unless I’m standing in the Kingdom of God, enjoying a love relationship with Jesus Christ and his Father, by the Holy Spirit. And I might think I’m loving God earnestly because of my devotions or my ministry but if I’m not loving my neighbor then I’m fooling myself.

V: When do we Love?

In the Prologue, St. Benedict himself speaks of the Lord answering this question: “The one who does no evil to a neighbor or allows dishonor against a neighbor.” We demonstrate the seriousness of our commitment to following the way of Christ not by sugary sentiments but by the enduring effort to treat well those who are closest to us—those most likely to have plans different from ours or to infringe on our treasured independence. Our love and compassion are measured by the way we deal with our immediate neighbors. As the saying goes, “Charity begins at home.”

The law of charity is all-encompassing; we sin against our neighbors by failing to love them. We don't have to do positive wrong to them or to give vent to malice against them. By failing to love them affectively and effectively we are doing our neighbor an injustice. The opposite of love is not red-hot hatred: it is coldness, coolness, indifference. It is a willful refusal to be touched by another's plight, a failure to rejoice with those who rejoice and to mourn with those who mourn others, receiving nothing from them and owing them nothing in return. Such a stance is effectively to deny or restrict the social element in human nature, and to turn our back on the truth that we all are members of Christ's body.

St. Aelred of Rievaulx who calls his monastery - a school of love - has a distinctive view of one of love's greatest enemies. He thinks that this is **envy**. This makes us look upon our neighbors with a jaundiced eye, rejoicing in their misfortune and being saddened by their success. Such contrariness not only is unfair to others, but also has an insidiously destructive effect on ourselves. St. Aelred writes, "Believe me, my brothers, there is nothing that so diminishes the joys of this present life or removes the hope of future happiness or simultaneously undermines all the other virtues [as envy]" (Sermo 55.6) Envy does not manifest itself openly; it is usually disguised, presenting itself as reasonable criticism, as merely trying to bring somebody down to their proper size. A failure to value the talents of others, to appreciate their worth and to praise them when they have done well is an injustice, whatever rationalizations we may offer as an excuse.

A local writer, Judy Qua shares her practical ways of loving, saying that , "We love when we treat our fellow human beings with justice, fairness, and kindness. We love when we stop ourselves from exploiting or taking advantage of the weak and helpless. We love when we constantly and deliberately think of the good of others rather than of our own selfish interests. We act with love when we look at the good in all people and in all situations rather than accentuate their imperfection and limitations. The law of love is to do unto others only as we would want them to do to us; for whatever we do or send out will come back to us and whatever we do to others will be done to us.

If there is love in our hearts, we will be able to radiate the same to others and to heal, bless, prosper, and direct it in waves of good to the whole nation. And others will spread this dynamic force to others still, creating a chain reaction. Love is creative. It lets others be. It elicits the best qualities from oneself and from the other."

VI: The Delight of Loving

"How good it is for us to contemplate the closeness which Jesus shows to everyone! If he speaks to someone, he looks into their eyes with deep love and concern: "Jesus, looking upon him, loved him" (*Mk* 10:21). We see how accessible he is, as he draws near the blind man (cf. *Mk* 10:46-52) and eats and drinks with sinners (cf. *Mk* 2:16) without worrying about being thought a glutton and a drunkard himself (cf. *Mt* 11:19). We see his sensitivity in allowing a sinful woman to anoint his feet (cf. *Lk* 7:36-50) and in receiving Nicodemus by night (cf. *Jn* 3:1-15). Jesus' sacrifice on the cross is nothing else than the culmination of the way he lived his entire life. Moved by his example, we want to enter fully into the fabric of society, sharing the lives of all, listening to their concerns, helping them materially and spiritually in their needs, rejoicing with those who rejoice, weeping with those who weep; arm in arm with others, we are

committed to building a new world. But we do so not from a sense of obligation, not as a burdensome duty, but as the result of a personal decision which brings us joy and gives meaning to our lives.

Sometimes we are tempted to be that kind of Christian who keeps the Lord's wounds at arm's length. Yet Jesus wants us to touch human misery, to touch the suffering flesh of others. He hopes that we will stop looking for those personal or communal niches which shelter us from the maelstrom of human misfortune and instead enter into the reality of other people's lives and know the power of tenderness. How good, how beautiful it would be if we loved one another as real brothers and sisters." *Evangelii Gaudium* #269-270

In union with Jesus, we seek what he seeks and we love what he loves. In the end, what we are seeking is the glory of the Father; we live and act "for the praise of his glorious grace" (Eph 1:6). Loving others is a spiritual force drawing us to union with God; indeed, one who does not love others "walks in the darkness" (1 Jn 2:11), "remains in death" (1 Jn3:14) and "does not know God" (1 Jn 4:8) Benedict XVI has said that "closing our eyes to our neighbor also blinds us to God", and that love is, in the end, the only light which "can always illuminate a world grown dim and give us the courage needed to keep living and working". "

Let us all run then towards the light, "our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love."

Points for Sharing

- How am I doing with sharing the love of Christ with my neighbors far and near?
- When a sister/co-worker/friend has a great success am I happy for her or him or do I get tied up in jealousy or competitiveness?
- How do I treat my fellow sisters in and out of the community? Am I as gentle and generous with them as when I treat my family and close friends?
- When I'm concentrating hard on my work and I'm interrupted by someone who needs something do I respond with loving kindness?
- How do I take the news about people's situation of poverty, calamities and suffering of millions here and in other countries?

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