

St. Paul: Saturday Session Thirty-one: Practical Applications of Charity 2

Ultimately, the most practical application of Charity is eternal union with God. As Fr. Ceslaus Spicq mentions in *Agape in the New Testament*, vol 2, 309-310, our destiny is to be one with One. No wonder we will spend eternity praising God for His grace. Too often, we forget our destiny to be One. Without this final purpose, we lose hope. Our end is the Beginning and the End, the Alpha and Omega of all being. So Spicq continues: "It would be impossible to exaggerate the importance of this revelation. 'To be...in His sight, in love' is the final object of God's eternal call, plan, and predestination (*klesis, prothesis, proorizein*). **A knowledge of the final end clarifies the entire order of means.** It is not surprising, then, that the Christian life here on earth should be defined by charity. Christian life has meaning only in terms of its end, union with God in filial and grateful love. Even before the first call to faith, God proposes a gift to each man which will enable him to welcome his vocation – the gift of love, ***The love of the truth which would save them***, 2 Thes 2:10. Only those who are willing to love will travel the road of salvation themselves, be faithful, and cling to the truth in whatever form it may present itself, no matter how costly its demands. *Agapan* implies preference and choice, and therefore renunciation. To choose is to sacrifice. The only ones to be saved, and arrive at 'being in God's presence in love' will be those who have welcomed the love of truth, God's first gift and pledge and condition of all gifts to come.

"The Christian life itself is simply the exercise and development of charity, ***professing the truth in charity***, Eph 4:15, or ...[**Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor; not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord**] Rom 12:11 ... [Thus] carrying out all the activities of an authentic love: ***meeting the demands of the hour***, Gal 6:9-10. These demands are principally combat and costly labors, performed under the eschatological light. ***But let us, who belong to the day ... put on the breastplate of faith and love, and, for a helmet, the hope of salvation***, 1 Thes 3:5. There is no evolution in the Apostle's thought on this point. Already in 1 Thessalonians 3:12, he prays: ***May the Lord make your love...increase till it overflows...to confirm your hearts in irreproachable holiness, in the presence of God our Father, when our Lord Jesus Christ comes with all His saints***. His prayer for the Philippians has the same object: ***The object of my prayer is that your love may become richer and richer...that you may be upright and blameless until the day of Christ***, Phil 1:9-11.

"We shall certainly be judged on our *agape*, on its increase, its choices, and its works. The possession of *agape* assures the passion of the purity and innocence required for admission into God's presence. The person who has loved God and neighbor, and been faithful to the prescriptions and demands of *agape* will incur no reproach. Evidently, religious consecration and holiness of life are necessary, but no virtue would have any value without love. Charity alone can make the other virtues valuable (1 Cor 13:1-4). The Christian finds constant support in his efforts on earth when he looks forward to the declaration of his innocence to come, and to his entrance into the heavenly kingdom. No matter how disinterested charity may be here on earth, it cannot be indifferent to possessing its object without contradicting its own nature." 310-311. Paul insists that charity is love, and God is Love, and our ultimate union is in Love Himself.

To love is to serve, so Paul emphasizes service above all. Consistent with his act of love to share the good news: ***For God, whom I serve in my spirit in the preaching of the gospel of His Son, is my witness as to how unceasingly I make mention of you, always in my prayers making request, if perhaps now at last by the will of God I may succeed in coming to you.*** Rom 1:9-10 Going to others, bringing Christ, the Word, the Savior, is the basic *agape* we owe to all our neighbors. Though we're not as powerful as Paul, we should do our share, lest our neighbors do without Jesus. Paul was inspired by the Holy Spirit to love his neighbors as apostle, as he says: ***But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit, and not in oldness of the letter.*** Rom 7:6 In our small way, we escape some binding law into newness of the Spirit, to love by serving others.

These days, we love to say that we minister to our neighbors, whether it be to preach, teach, administer sacramental grace, heal, nurse, encourage, or any other specific ministry. Paul urges us to this service, even encouraging us to take from those with more and give to those with less. ***Or did I commit a sin in humbling myself so that you might be exalted, because I preached the gospel of God to you without charge? I robbed other churches by taking wages from them to serve you; and when I was present with you and was in need, I was not a burden to anyone; for when the brethren came from Macedonia they fully supplied my need, and in everything I kept myself from being a burden to you, and will continue to do so.*** 2 Cor 11:7-9 Our service is not so strenuous, or so extreme, but taking from our own hide to serve others is the way to love. ***For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF."*** Gal 5:13 Paul sees the whole wholely. Everything integrates into One.

In this unity, Paul affirms: ***Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve.*** Col 3:23-24 Just as Jesus was 100% for me, so I should be 100% for Him. Just as He loved all humans, so should I. Naturally, I follow far behind. But I can follow ever closer, and will be ever happier for my nearness to Christ. Remember what Fr. Spicq told us: Christ is God, Who is Love. There's no better place to be, no better Person(s) to be with, no better act to do. Paul, inspired by this unity, can hardly contain his enthusiasm. Let's follow him and Jesus on the way to Love!

Then we will renounce the idols of the day: entertainment, self-seeking, feeling good... Instead, imitate Thessalonians: ***you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He***

raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come. 1 Thes 1:9-10. Idols can't satisfy; they only lie to us. After believing their lies for so long, why not change? The insane do the same thing again and again, expecting different results. Let's wise up. Put on the newness of Christ, do something different, worship the true God. Then we emerge from never-never land into light. Then we serve our neighbors as Christ recommended. We will **serve them all the more, because those who partake of the benefit are believers and beloved.** 1 Tim 6:2 Though we serve both those who join with us in worship and those who don't, we should serve more heartily those who are in the Church. Often, they hurt us the most, as we expect more from them. But carry on in Christ's love. He suffered the most from His apostles, who betrayed Him, ran away, and refused to believe his teaching and miracles. Only the Holy Spirit could crack their skulls.

Let us be more like Paul: **I thank God, whom I serve with a clear conscience the way my forefathers did, as I constantly remember you in my prayers night and day, longing to see you, even as I recall your tears, so that I may be filled with joy.** 2 Tim 1:3-4 You might say that your Church brethren do not fill you with joy. Fair enough, but **put on Christ Jesus**, Rom 13:14, and allow Love to fill you. You see that Paul is busy with the practical work of loving as God loves. Naturally, we fall short of God's love, but, in His image and likeness, we strive to Love. Paul emerged from Jewish practice, and hatred of the Church, to profound love of all its members in Christ Jesus. **For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?** Heb 9:13-14

Loving service is enthusiastic, as Paul shows in Rom 12. **Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect,** Rom 12:1-2. Paul, as usual, integrates everything as Jesus unified it. Love is service, which is sacrifice, which is worship, all good, acceptable, and perfect. Why is it perfect? Because it is Love in action, doing what Love does, and approaching Him more and more closely, until He takes us to Himself. Even the cup of cold water, given in His name, is Love, and merits eternal reward, Mat 10:42. All becomes one in One.

Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor; not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality, Rom 12:9-13. You see from Paul's list that anything can count. If a cup of cold water counts, so does anything that serves. Since anything covers a multitude, we can be sure that our efforts succeed. However, those people we serve may not agree. This crushing realization can disturb us. But since anything will serve, we can easily adjust until we provide agreeable service. That leads to another problem: some people want sinful service. At that point, we know that sin does not serve, no matter how insistent people may be that it does. That's what Paul means by **Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good.** Then he lists some of the "anything" that we can do to serve Love.

With that perspective, Paul opens up to any sort of service, and recommends completely free ministry. **...you will be enriched in everything for all liberality, which through us is producing thanksgiving to God. For the ministry of this service is not only fully supplying the needs of the saints, but is also overflowing through many thanksgivings to God,** 2 Cor 9:11-12. Liberal applications of Love transcend the mechanics of service. Invisible but real thanksgiving to God rises up to heaven because Christians return God's Infinite Love by their finite loving service. God forms community, if we let Him. If we accept His love, and give freely to others, then Love-community flourishes in us. Whatever the saints' needs are, we serve them. As these needs change, so does our service. But throughout all these details, Love lives in our service.

Paul uses different words, but the message is the same. **...for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ,** Eph 4:12-13. Paul reminds us that we do not start perfect. Instead, we begin as foul sinners. But Love equips us to serve. As we grow in service, we build up the body of Christ. It's a struggle, but we gradually attain the unity of faith and the Knowledge of God's Son, Jesus, who came, **not to be served, but to serve,** Mat 20:28, Mk 10:45. Growing up in loving service, we mature, even to the fullness of Christ. Paul is so integrated, and his messages so full, that we can unpack them forever.

You are right to say that unpacking puzzles us, and takes work. Indeed it does! But it's great joy as well. **But even if I am being poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I rejoice and share my joy with you all. You too, I urge you, rejoice in the same way and share your joy with me,** Phil 2:17-18. Exuberant as ever, Paul rejoices in suffering, because suffering shows Love. **Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice,** Phil 4:4. Paul expresses the complete picture, spanning all human experience, returning each gift to Love Himself. **...thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because He considered me faithful, putting me into service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor,** 1 Tim 1:12-13. Paul shows us how to serve in Love.