

## The Way of “Love” (Greek *Agapē*) (4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year C)

### 1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13—The “Most Excellent Way” of “Love” (Greek *agapē*)

<sup>31</sup> But earnestly desire *the higher gifts*. And I will show you *a still more excellent way*.  
<sup>1</sup> If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not *love*, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. <sup>2</sup> And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. <sup>3</sup> If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. <sup>4</sup> *Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; <sup>5</sup> it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; <sup>6</sup> it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. <sup>7</sup> Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. <sup>8</sup> Love never ends; as for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. <sup>9</sup> For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect; <sup>10</sup> but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away. <sup>11</sup> When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I gave up childish ways. <sup>12</sup> For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood. <sup>13</sup> *So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.* (1 Cor 12:12-30)*

1. Way of “Love”: “most excellent path” (Greek *kath’ hyperbolēn hodon*) (1 Cor 12:31)
2. Life of Virtue: Jewish way of referring to *life of virtue* (Psalm 1:1-2, 6; 86:11; 119:30)
3. Greek Words for “Love”: “four words were used for ‘love’” (J. Fitzmyer)

1. *Storgē*: affection, as between parents and children. Rarely used of erotic love. (See 3 Macc 5:31-32; 4 Macc 14:13 LXX)
2. *Erōs*: erotic love or desire, as between a man and woman. (See Prov 7:18; 30:16 LXX). Never used in the New Testament.
3. *Philia*: love between friends or equals (see Sir 22:20 LXX). Sometimes used of erotic love (See Prov 15:17; 7:18 LXX).
4. *Agapē*: willing the good and making a total gift of self to another, as between human beings and God. (Deut 6:4-6; Jer 2:2; Wis 3:9 LXX). Can also be used of love b/w spouses (Song 2:5-7 LXX)

5. Active: *active* nature of love; 16 Greek verbs (not adjectives) (1 Cor 13:4-8).
6. Portrait of “Love” (Greek *agapē*): what love is and what it is not:

*What Agapē Is / Does*

1. Patient
2. Kind
3. Rejoices in the right
4. Bears all things

*What Agapē Is Not / Does Not*

1. Jealous
2. Boastful
3. Arrogant
4. Rude

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|------------------------|--------------------------|
| 5. Believes all things | 5. Insist on its own way |
| 6. Hopes all things    | 6. Irritable             |
| 7. Endures all things  | 7. Resentful             |
| 8. Never ends          | 8. Rejoice at wrong      |

Ceslaus Spicq: “if the word ‘charity’ is replaced in this strophe by the name of Jesus, the hymn becomes an exact description of the Savior’s life.”<sup>1</sup>

- 7. Permanence: permanence vs. impermanence other gifts (1 Cor 13:8-10).
- 8. Maturity: *agapē* is for the spiritually *mature* person (1 Cor 13:11; cf. 3:1-2).
- 9. Theological Virtues: “faith, hope, and love” “abide” (1 Cor 13:13).

### The Living Tradition

St. Thérèse of Lisieux: During my meditation, my desires caused me a veritable martyrdom, and I opened the Epistles of St. Paul to find some kind of answer. Chapters 12 and 13 of the First Epistle to the Corinthians fell under my eyes... I continued my reading and this sentence consoled me: “Yet strive after THE BETTER GIFTS, and I point out to you a yet more excellent way” [1 Cor 12:31; 13:1]. And the Apostle explains how all the most PERFECT gifts are nothing without LOVE. That Charity is the EXCELLENT WAY that leads most surely to God. (St. Thérèse, *Story of a Soul*, Chapter IX)<sup>2</sup>

Thomas à Kempis: Without charity a good work profits nothing (1 Cor 13:3), but whatever is done with charity, no matter how small and insignificant, is always fruitful. God pays more attention to the amount of love and affection with which a person performs a work than how much he actually does. (Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, 1.15; trans. M. Nazarene Prestofillipo, F.S.P.)

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection (4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year C)

- 1. According to St. Paul, what is the purpose of the charismatic gifts? Which of these gifts do you think you might possess, and how might you use it for the building up of the body of Christ?

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<sup>1</sup> Spicq, *Agape in the New Testament*, 2:152.

<sup>2</sup> St. Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of St. Thérèse of Lisieux* (trans. James Clarke, O.C.D; Washington, D.C.: ICS, 1996), 193-94.

### For Further Reading

1. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Letters of Saint Paul to the Corinthians* (trans. F. R. Larcher, O.P.; eds. J. Mortensen and E. Alarcón; Lander, WY: Aquinas Institute, 2012).
2. Gerald Bray, ed. *1-2 Corinthians* (Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament VI; Downers Grove, IL.: IVP, 1999).
3. George T. Montague, SM, *First Corinthians* (Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010).
4. Ceslaus Spicq, O.P., *Agape in the New Testament*. 3 vols.; trans. Sr. Marie Aquinas McNamara, O.P. and Sr. Mary Honoria Richter, O.P.; repr. Eugene, Or.: Wipf & Stock, 2006 [orig. 1963, 1965, 1966],