

**The Love of God**  
**DAY OF RECOLLECTION**  
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Joseph A. Komonchak

It is no easy task for a priest of barely two years of pastoral experience to address a group of religious on the life of the Spirit. Not so surprisingly, perhaps, I take my topic from a reality which was first brought home to me in my latter days in the Seminary. My topic is "The Creative Love of God."

Now it is well known to you that the phrase "the love of God" may be taken in two ways: God's love for us, or ours for Him. What is at best a grammatical necessity, however, is a convenient symbol of the inseparability of the two loves. This is an aspect to which I should like to return, but my main initial concern is God's love for us, as *creative*.

Perhaps the best way of approaching the subject is to begin from a few passages of the New Testament. In Romans 5, St. Paul finds the proof that our "hope is no mockery, because God's love has flooded our inmost heart through the Holy Spirit he has given us":

For at the very time when we were still powerless, then Christ died for the wicked. Even for a just man one might actually brave death, but Christ died for us while we were still sinners, and that is God's own proof of his love for us (Rm 5:5-8).

Among the chapters of the long hymn of thanks and praise with which St. Paul opens the Epistle to the Ephesians, there is St. Paul's brief summation of the meaning of salvation:

Time was when you were dead in your sins and wickedness, when you followed the evil ways of the present age, when you obeyed the commander of the spiritual power of the air, the spirit now at work among God's rebel subjects. We too were of their number: we all lived our lives in sensuality and obeyed the promptings of our own instincts and emotions. In our natural condition, we were children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, who is rich in mercy, for the great love he bore us, brought us to life with Christ, even when we were dead in our sins.... And in union with Christ Jesus, he raised us up and enthroned us with him in the heavenly realms, so that he might display in the ages to come how immense are the resources of his grace, and how great his kindness to us in Christ Jesus (Eph 2:1-7).

Then there are the lines of St. John's First Epistle, familiar to us all:

In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation of our sins.... We love because he loved us first (1 Jn 4:9-10, 19).

Now these three New Testament texts agree in this: in telling of a love of God that has not been prompted by any beauty or goodness in ourselves, but is, as St. Paul says, the gift of a God rich in mercy. Not only that, however, for this love of God is not without effect: it brings us from the death that is sin to the life that is our love of God. "We love because he loved us first."

These two aspects reveal what I have called the creative love of God: God does not love us because of a prior goodness in us, but out of mercy, and the love of God creates in us a goodness and beauty that are the reflection of His own.

The love of man is prompted by a beauty or goodness it finds already present in a thing or person. The goodness creates the love, and a man desires union with the beloved. The special effect of this love is to draw a man out of himself, to change the center of his conscious life from self to other. Human love of this sort is a splendid thing.

Great as it is, though, God's love far surpasses it. For no created goodness creates God's love; God's love creates beauty and goodness wherever it exists. Creation is an act of love—"You love all things that exist," says the Book of Wisdom—and the beauty of nature *is* because God now loves the world.

Still the most beautiful reality in creation is not nature but authentic human life, and it was to create that kind of beauty that God acted in history. And here we can recall the words of Deuteronomy:

It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his heart upon you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples; but it is because the Lord loves you...that the Lord has brought you out and redeemed you from the house of bondage (Deut 7:7-8).

This is not just an indication of Israel's unworthiness of God's special attention, for under a hundred different images God's care for Israel is described as setting Israel apart: he has taught Israel to walk; he loves Israel as husband does wife; he has created Israel. Redemption is creation, creation of a redeemed people (von Rad on beauty).

But still the creative force of God's love did not have full sway till there came One who could speak the total Yes of humanity to God's Love. What is abstractly called the hypostatic union is the definitive and ultimate gift of God's love, and the humanity which that love creates is the highest point of the scale of human beauty. The love of God that became flesh in Jesus had its first effect in the creation of the love by which Jesus loved His Father and loved us. And this human love of Jesus is the perfect mirror of His Father's love, for it is a love for the sinner, for the sick, for the poor, for the weak—for those who are in fact *unlovely*. But—and this is the astonishing thing—that love changed the sinner, the sick, the poor, the weak; and if the Gospels explicitly tell us of the more spectacular manifestations of that change in the miracles of Jesus, they do not overlook the fact that sinners were drawn to Him, listened to His Word, sat down to table with Him, and wept before Him the tears of their repentance. Jesus loved, and people saw that love and its beauty, and they came to that beauty, and that love made *them* beautiful. That is the way, you recall, that St. Augustine explains that sentence of Jesus: "No one can come to me unless the Father draw him."

The love of God, we said, created the human love of Jesus by which He was, in the current phrase, "the Man for others." But the love God had for His Son made man, St. John's Gospel tells us, God also has for us. At the Last Supper Jesus prays "that the world may know that thou hast sent me and hast loved them even as thou hast loved me.... Righteous Father, ... I made known to them thy name, and I will make it known, that the love with which thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them" (Jn 17:23, 26).

We are loved with the love the Father has for Jesus. That love is the Holy Spirit, and as the Spirit created and guided the life of Jesus, so the Spirit creates and guides our Christian lives. If we are loved with the Father's love for Jesus, that love makes us like Jesus, puts us on a level with

Jesus, brings us into the order of Christ. A love which would be said to be owed only to the Son of God made man has—incredibly—been extended to us, and it creates us in the image of Jesus. This is the real meaning of the supernatural, of sanctifying grace. A love has been communicated to us that far surpasses any right of ours, and it has given us the radical power to live a life like the life of Jesus. That power is exercised through the central virtues of faith and love, for by faith we approach, interpret, and judge reality as Jesus did, and by love we meet it in the characteristic way in which he met it. The criterion of a Christian's life is the life of Jesus, and this not for some extrinsic reason. We have actually been loved by the Father as Jesus was loved by His Father, and that love makes us different from other men and calls us in every decision of our lives to give full range to its creative power to change our lives and that of the world.

We began with speaking abstractly of the difference between God's love and ours, that while ours loves a given goodness or beauty, God's love creates the beauty and goodness of its object. We gave it some concrete form by seeing how the people of Israel was "the peculiar people of Yahweh" because of His love. But in Jesus the full extent of the creative power of God's love became clear because it created His beautiful love. Incredibly, we found also that we are loved by the same creative and powerful love, and that that is the meaning of a phrase in St. John's First Epistle, "Even in this life we are as he is" (1 Jn 5:17).

Now, if Baptism means that an image of Christ's beauty is given us, it is the work of our lives to develop it, to give to it the specific form that characterizes the individual selves that are the creations of a love that God has not had for any other person. Creation is an on-going process, and God's creative power awaits only the free "Yes" of our co-operation to bring forth new images of His beauty and of the beauty of His Son. But that is not even accurate, for God does not await our "Yes": our "Yes" is itself the highest creation of His love and the nearest mirror of His glory.

If we do not always mirror forth the glory of God in our lives, one reason may perhaps be the fact that we do not really appreciate the dignity that is ours because of the Father's love for us in Jesus. Moral life is always defined by reference to the human condition, and perhaps our sense of moral duty has not been built on a sufficient grasp of our situation before God. St. Leo's phrase: "Christian, realize your dignity!" always retains its point.

But perhaps there is another, not entirely distinct, reason why we obscure the beauty of Christ that should be in us. For if the incredible fact is that we are loved by the Father as Jesus is loved, it is no less incredible that we are called to love as Jesus loved. "I give you a new commandment: love one another; as I have loved you, so you are to love one another" (Jn 13:34). "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Dwell in my love. If you heed my commands, you will dwell in my love, as I have heeded my Father's commands and dwell in his love" (Jn 15:9-10). "This is my commandment: love one another as I have loved you. There is no grater love than this, that a man should lay down his life for his friends" (Jn 15:12-13). "It is by this that we know what love is: that Christ laid down his life for us. And we in our turn are bound to lay down our lives for our brothers" (1 Jn 3:16). "If God thus lived us, dear friends, we in turn are bound to love one another" (1 Jn 4:11).

Because of the love of God for us, we are called to love—to love God in return, yes, but just as emphatically, to love one another. And our love is to be of the same sort as the love of Jesus—a love not necessarily provoked by an already existing beauty or goodness, but a love founded on a real hope in what God's creative love in us can accomplish. We are called to love, not as man loves, but

as God and Christ have loved, freely and generously. That means never taking one another's present state as the criterion of our love—even the pagans do that, Jesus said—but, rather, loving in the knowledge that this brother or sister is one into whose heart God's creative love is struggling to break, that our mirror of that love may be the instrument of that breakthrough, that our love, then, might participate in the creative power of God's love. If God loved us while we were still sinners, if that undeserved love is solely responsible for whatever dim beauty there may now be in our lives, then it is radically self-contradictory of us to love only those who are presently "loveable". Where would we be if God had loved us in that way?

[Crossed out: "Today, perhaps it is necessary to add that if the love of God has been able to transform individual lives, it ought also to have a similar effect on society and history. Christian love ought to be the instrument of the reversal of the continually downward spiral of human sin and evil. It can be that if it imitates God's love in being completely unselfish, completely free, and completely universal.]

What holds us back is the knowledge that to love in such fashion is to leave oneself open to real hurt and even to death. Jesus had to die because He loved as He did, and the real meaning of Christian suffering is the pain that accompanies love that is hindered or refused. If we ever succeed in loving as Jesus loved, we can be sure that it will also mean suffering as Jesus suffered. But that is the very moment at which the creative power of God will be most evident. For Christ's love was able to transform the meaning of suffering and death, so that Christians no longer regard them as merely the consequences of sins but the way to life. And if we love as Jesus loved, we ourselves will be able to transform the evil we may encounter in our situations into a good and a beauty that will remind people of the life of Him from whom we take our name. To the extent that we succeed, the creative love of God will have moved out from the private world of our individual selves to the universe of society and history, where it is so desperately needed.

You will pardon me, I hope, for not having spoken more to the concrete circumstances of your lives as religious. But I find the points I have made of central importance, and the religious life a privileged way of demonstrating and realizing the basic meaning of all life that may be called Christian. The religious life derives its sense from that central meaning, and where this is obscured, the life of religion loses direction. The religious life can be seen itself as a special love of God, creating a new beauty in the world and calling us to realize with special brilliance more of the effects of the manifold grace of God. But that is another question, for another time.